MARION ZIMMER BRADLEY'S
FANTASY

Magazine
Issue #22

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CHANGING FATE

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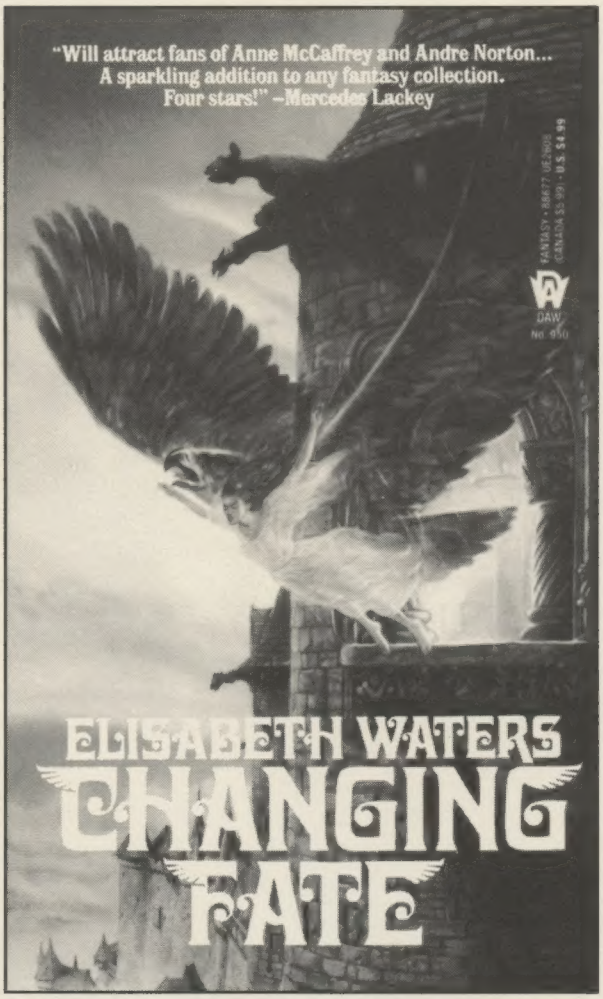
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ELISABETH WATERS
CHANGING FATE

Lady Acila has been running her father's keep for as long as she can remember. Her father has spent most of his time away at war and her twin brother Briam is a daydreamer, a man obsessed with music and in no way suited to the practical job of managing the keep. But Acila doesn't mind—in fact she is desperate to remain in the secluded safety of her home, for she harbors a dark secret. Acila is a shapechanger—a being feared and despised by the people of her world.

But when the keep is besieged by the army of a Lord who brings proof of her father's death, Acila and Briam cannot defend their lands and must flee for their lives. Little does Acila realize as she leaves the only safe haven she has ever known, that she has begun a journey which will bring her to a greater understanding of her kind, and change her fate in ways she cannot begin to imagine.

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MARION ZIMMER BRADLEY'S FANTASY

Magazine

EDITORIAL

It's happened; we're going to have an anthology of the **BEST OF MZB's FANTASY Magazine**. It's scheduled to come out from Warner Books in December 1994.

Just as so often there's an anthology of the best of this or that, this gives me a chance to say what I consider the best of the best. It's no secret to anyone that early in the business of publishing the first few issues, I sometimes had to use a story I considered less than perfect. More recently I've been forced, for lack of space, to reject stories that I would have greeted, during those first few issues, with great whoops of joy. That's one thing I'd like to get through people's heads. All too often I have to reject a story that I'd love to buy because at the moment I'm a little overstocked. An operation as small as this one can only keep a working inventory of stories for the next couple of issues. I always find it hard to resist overbuying, because so much of the time the slushpile is unrewarding, and when I find anything good, I want to keep it.

So when I reject your story, you really should try it on at least three or four other markets. The rejection may not mean it's bad, but simply that at present I can't find a slot in an upcoming issue. Magazine slots for short fiction are limited. I must have rejected twenty or thirty of Lynne Armstrong-Jones' stories for every one I've printed. [*Well, actually I checked the computer—she only averages six rejections per acceptance.—HRJ*]

A few rules for my aspiring writers: in general, the shorter your story, the more likely I am to find a place to crowd it in somehow; and after you've sold me a few really short shorts, the more likely I am to start looking seriously at your longer pieces. Granted, one of our most popular stories was by an absolute tyro—Dawn Albright's "Black Ribbon". But a story as instantly appealing as that one doesn't come along every day; and all too often, I am required by my editorial staff to choose a cover story by someone with a book or more already to their credit.

But one of the things very dear to my heart is the discovery of new talent. We'll probably never stop discovering new writers as long as the new writers keep coming along. And they will never stop coming as long as there are people out there who would rather read than play computer games or basketball.

So if you weren't chosen for this anthology, keep writing. There will be others, I hope. And if you want to write a cover story, send me something short first. 90% of our new writers are in the super-short lengths, and after I've printed a couple of your very short stories, and the readers know you, I'll print something longer. Who knows, I'm always hoping that tomorrow's mail will bring me a story I'll fall in love with, like "Dragon Three Two Niner". Or "Black Ribbon". Or "Moonrise". Or—well, no doubt you have your own list.

At first we used some science fiction and horror, because there just hadn't been so many fantasy markets around and writers had gotten used to not finding a market for the best fantasy. So they wrote science fiction or horror. But I think this market has created a new kind of fantasy, one not so heavily slanted toward horror. Of course, if we have a really irresistible story with elements of horror or science fiction, we'll print it. But between a good fantasy and an equally good science fiction story, I'll take the fantasy.

Now you know on what I base those decisions. Who knows? Maybe you'll be our next discovery. And if you are, nobody will be happier than...

Marion Bradley

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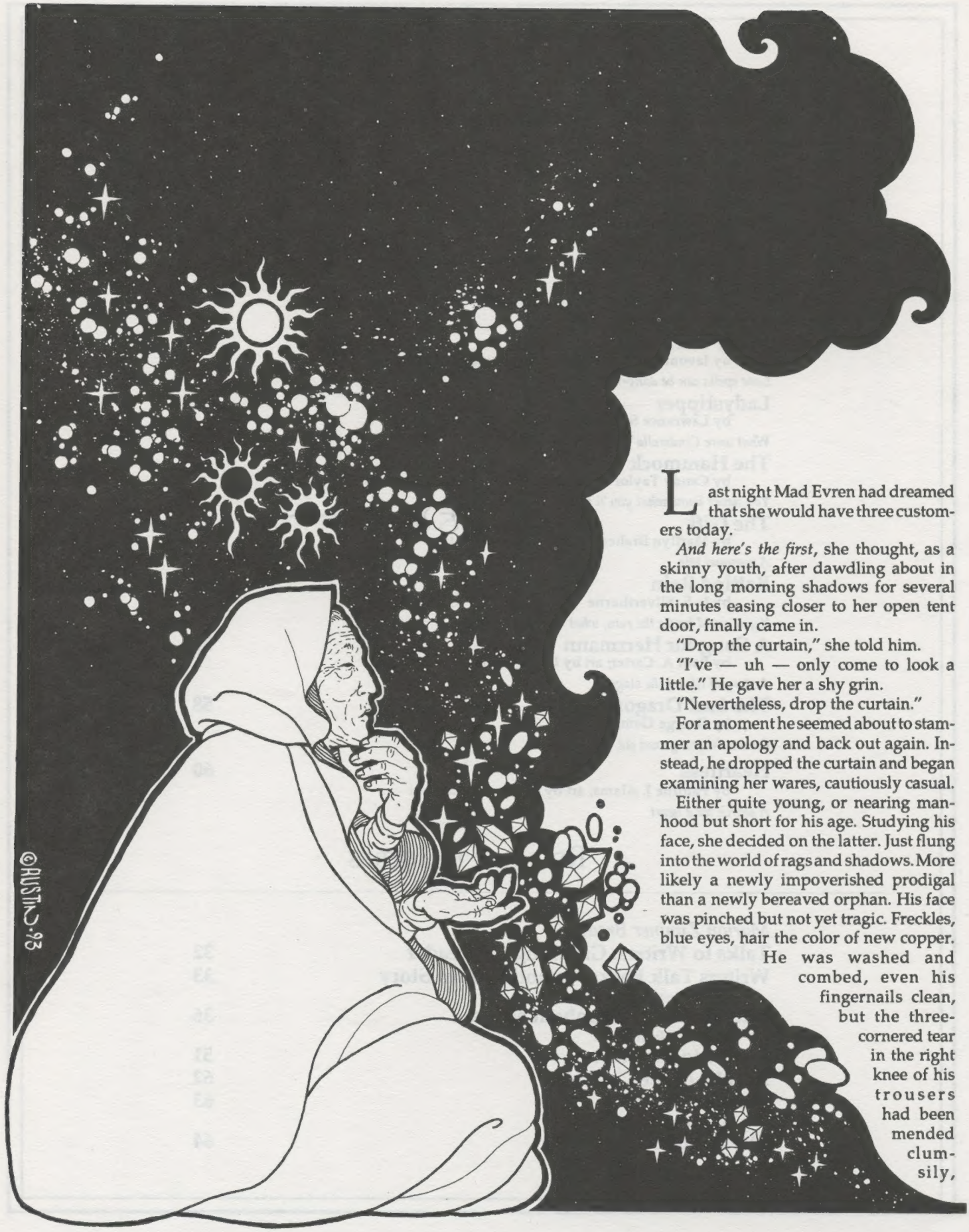


Last night Mad Evren had dreamed that she would have three customers today.

And here's the first, she thought, as a skinny youth, after dawdling about in the long morning shadows for several minutes easing closer to her open tent door, finally came in.

"Drop the curtain," she told him.

"I've — uh — only come to look a little." He gave her a shy grin.

"Nevertheless, drop the curtain."

For a moment he seemed about to stammer an apology and back out again. Instead, he dropped the curtain and began examining her wares, cautiously casual.

Either quite young, or nearing manhood but short for his age. Studying his face, she decided on the latter. Just flung into the world of rags and shadows. More likely a newly impoverished prodigal than a newly bereaved orphan. His face was pinched but not yet tragic. Freckles, blue eyes, hair the color of new copper.

He was washed and combed, even his fingernails clean, but the three-cornered tear in the right knee of his trousers had been mended clumsily,

Mad Evren's Dreams

by Phyllis Ann Karr

and the brown bloodstain around it imperfectly laundered.

Again searching last night's dreams, she found a copper weather vane in the shape of a human being wearing a blue blindfold, standing at a fork in the road. One trail led to a golden hall of justice, the other to green farmland. Wind blew the weather vane toward the hall, where red stripes appeared on the body and black circles on the blindfold.

"You're looking at trinkets, boy," she said.

He jerked up straight. "I'm not a 'boy' anymore!"

She chuckled. "Well, let this old girl hope you'll live long enough to like hearing yourself called 'boy' again. I said, those are trinkets. Copies of the most popular old inscriptions dredged up from Green Glass Lake. I etch 'em by the threes and fours on whatever comes to hand."

"From Green Glass Lake itself? What do they do?"

"Copies. Enhance destinies. Act as love charms. Keep the wearer dry in a drizzle. Depends on who uses 'em. Mostly I sell 'em to merchants who travel around and peddle 'em somewhere else. Spread the cursed blessings. Now you...I've got a better one for you right here in my lap." She fished it out of the jumble, held it up to glint in the light of her single lamp. "The genuine ancient piece. Plucked from a swamp-rat's nest over the best of the old, slushed-over farmland. Pure gold. Two sheaves of wheat on one side, ancient goddess on the other.

Artwork by Alicia Austin

Artwork by Alicia Austin

Can still see her winking at you. Goddess of farming, trust me. Whoever carries this could enjoy a strong back and good luck with any farm."

Apparently trying to raise one of his reddish-gold eyebrows, the lad raised both. "How much would it cost?"

"Oh, you can afford this one, lad."

"Pure gold? Real ancient engraving?" He waved his hand at a shelf of copies. "And say — just say — I wanted one of these? How much would that cost me?"

"Everything you've got. Everything you've got, to the shirt on your back, and more."

"Everything I've got?" He forced a laugh. "For one of these 'trinkets'? And you say I could afford the real gold piece? Good-bye, old grandmother." He turned to leave, a little too abruptly.

"Everything you've got," she told him, "for that piece you slipped off my shelf just now. Better pay me direct, boy. Or return the trinket."

He jumped and looked back. "I...slipped...off? You — you think I stole one of your — your trinkets? Old woman, you're crazy!"

"Every swampsearcher pays a price," she answered calmly. "I call myself lucky to escape with craziness. But you're no thief. Don't try to fancy yourself one."

"Well...well, what are you going to do? Call the guards?"

"So you can slip it back while they're on the way, and try to get a coin out of me in recompense for false accusation?" She grinned. "They wouldn't believe you, boy, but they wouldn't believe Mad Old Evren, either. All the same, better pay me now, direct."

"I'm — I'm getting out of here before you...before you fancy I steal something else. Good day to you, Ma — Ma'am." He ducked out, letting the curtain swing back behind him.

She sat watching it sway for a few moments before hooking it open again.

Iamas Self-found (the name was of his own choosing) breathed a sigh of relief, walked away whistling from Mad Evren's tent, paused at a gemcutter's booth twenty strides distant, and sighed his relief once more while pretending to scrutinize the jewelry.

He thought, *well, that was easy enough. If you like doing that kind of thing. A few bad moments, but the old dame couldn't really have seen anything, could she? Or she wouldn't have let me go so easily.*

But now the gemcutter seemed to eye him with suspicion. Ah! Because he'd hitched his vest straight again. Not an elegant habit — he'd been trying to break himself of it for a long time — but hardly one that any *real* thief would have let develop in the first place. Iamas grinned at the gemcutter, gave him a compliment, and hinted about a return visit. The gemcutter grinned back and started glancing over his display, pretending nonchalance. Pretending equal nonchalance, Iamas lingered until the man had time to make sure all his stock was safe. Iamas didn't want to be blamed for a professional's coincidental theft at just this moment! He moved on only when all chance of that particular danger was past.

His heart would not slow down, even now. He had safe in his pocket a talisman that should bring him enough for a new start in life — and pray True-God he'd never need to do anything else like that again! — but the sooner he could change Mad Evren's talisman into money, the better.

Calculating how much he would ask, and already dreaming of how he might increase it to a life-size fortune at the fabled races of Heartwind Valley, he selected a large silvery tent, its front awning embroidered in blue with several wizards' symbols and the name Anzhara.

Hearing the uproar rush by outside, Mad Evren sat on quietly in her tent. Whether it was some other thief or her own of the slight frame and coppery hair being hustled to Justice Hall, her participation would be irrelevant. Thieves had occasionally pilfered from her before now. The judges punished them or let them wriggle free without her assistance. In either case, she never saw the stolen items again. She suspected the judges confiscated and kept them. An ancient coin on a chain eased from between the teeth of a Swamp Dragon, the fourth copy of an inscription traced line by line from some statue's base half sunk in the muddy bottom of a tarn...trinkets. Let the judges keep them, in return for keeping the fair relatively free from thievery. She could lose twice the number she did, and go on eating just as well. Besides, her dreams had promised three clients today. She sat and waited.

The second came about midday: a tall, gaunt woman in frayed black draperies. Probably the mendicant devotee of some unpopular old god. Almost every deity known to the world was older than the usurping "True-God".

"I look like a beggar," the woman said with a slight accent. "But I have money."

"I don't always ask for money. Let me study out your need."

This client dropped the curtain without being told, then bent smoothly at the knees until her lower legs rested on the ground. Evren rubbed her scraggly-haired chin and gazed at leisure, recalling a dream about a fire burning beneath the waters of Green Glass Lake. Orange and purple, the fire rested on the lake bottom, creating around itself a bubble of bright air, sending white roots down through the green glass, and permeating everything with a fragrance as of lilacs and citron. The roots finally cracked and crumbled the glass, the earth sucked down the lake, and starbushes began to sprout from the ruins.

Evren had forgotten this dream until now. In her prime, she had often dived beneath those same shallow waters in waking life, taking fragments a few chips at a time from the mystic lakebed — many shards of green glass, some with small insects or the imprints of ancient script fused into them, all imbued with traces of the awesome power that had created lake out of city — in a single flash, folk said. She still had half a hundred glassy pieces, polished down and set in filigree. She rarely brought them out except after a night when she had dreamed of the Lake, and she rarely remembered such dreams until the right client appeared.

Fetching the velvet-lined jar that held her remaining glass fragments, Mad Evren laid it in front of her client and suggested, "Try pulling one out at random. That usually works."

Reverently, the client made a few gestures and a short chant over the jar before drawing out a fairly large fragment in a gilt-wire frame. After squinting at it a moment, she said, "Dame, may I beg the use of a mirror?"

Evren handed her one a famous sorceress had paid reluctantly, years ago, for a similar bit of Green Glass Lake. The new client studied her fragment's reflection and said, "It is the script we call Ancient Angularitic. I know a related language. This says, I think, 'The owl seeks what no one has lost.' Perhaps a line of poetry."

"Are you an owl?" said Mad Evren.

The other woman returned Evren's stare. Beneath thin brows, her eyes were large and dark. "I seek," she said. "I search this fair, old mother, as you search your swamps. For that which may not yet know that it is lost."

"One for the god you serve, maybe?"

"We are forbidden to name our 'foreign' gods in this place."

Evren chuckled. "Well, I'll give you my secret, too, in the name of safety. I don't more than half believe in 'True-God'. Now, for that green glass charm you're holding, the only price I'd ask you is your god's name."

Curling her fingers around the fragment, the woman put her hand into the folds of her robe. When she brought it out again, her fingers were empty. She rose, laid the jar in Evren's lap, and said, softly but proudly: "The One Whom All Serve, knowingly or unknowingly. Jahtan."

"Ah, that one, is it?" Mad Evren chuckled again. "As good a name for it as any other. Well, try looking through the damaged goods Justice Hall's spewing out today, why don't you? Might find a bargain there."

At need, Ythis Kasath'at could don a wig and shed a layer of clothing. She doubted that the need would arise today. Old Evren seemed one who believed in everything and nothing — one who was loved by all the gods — and therefore one worthy of trust.

Fingering the green glass talisman in a deep pocket of her inner tunic, the priestess of Jahtan made her way to Justice Hall, where she found an expectant throng gathered in wait at the doors. She joined it. For a stranger from overseas, she mingled easily.

Many fairgoers were snatching a meal as they stood and waited, so that the smells of spices, grease, and ale hovered thickly over the less pleasant odors of the flesh, making any occasional breeze doubly welcome. Ythis found herself beside a swarthy man unwrapping a length of highly seasoned sausage. He offered her not a thumb's length of it, to her profound relief.

As he swallowed the last bite, three guards emerged from the building. Tall and burly, they marched in a tight triangle. With them came the freshly-judged malefactor, but he was short and slight. Little could be seen of him save a patch of coppery hair, until the front guard stepped forward a long pace while those behind him halted.

The first guard cleared his throat and declaimed in a loud, hoarse voice, with all the reflected authority of the judge in person: "Let all decent people know that this man, Iamas Self-found, has been caught in thievery and is declared outlaw..."

The guard added a phrase concerning the length of Iamas Self-found's outlawry, but few in the crowd could have heard it for cheering. It hardly mattered, since few such outlaws outlived their sentence. Many had personal enemies eager to tear them apart just outside the fairgrounds. They were sometimes the lucky ones, for here as in other places could be found folk who delighted in substituting a naked outlaw for bear, lion, or malformed Swamp creature at the baiting stake. Whether Iamas Self-found knew all this or not, he quivered visibly, and might have tried bolting, but for the guards.

The first guard finishing his speech, his fellows pulled off the new outlaw's garments one by one and threw them into the crowd. When the boy stood shivering in nothing but his linen underbreeches (good quality, those), the guards bound his wrists together and tied them by a short cord to the harness of a very small donkey. One guard took the donkey's reins. The others produced whips. The donkey kicked and lunged several times when stray lashes landed hard on its back after missing Self-found. The crowd parted before the procession as much to avoid stray lashes as to recognize the

Artwork by Alicia Austin

guards' authority. Most of the blows, however, found their target. Twice or thrice near the end of the journey Self-found cried out, once when he was whipped back to his feet after a fall.

Ythis Kasath'at could witness such things with utter stoicism. She followed the donkey closely, moving along the edge of the mob like a wave moving along the surface of deep ocean, and few people seemed to notice how little active part she took in hooting and refuse-flinging.

Twenty strides beyond the fairground, the guards untied Self-found, let him roll to the ground, and led the donkey toward the animal enclosures, now and again glancing back as if in mild curiosity. The new outlaw was fortunate. Neither personal enemies nor sports-baiters came forward. Rather, the mob gradually melted into individuals remembering that they had business of their own elsewhere.

Ythis waited until the last stragglers had drifted back to the fairground. The new outlaw still lay, groaning softly, his back from shoulders to calves a maze of intersecting welts. The priestess sat on her knees beside him, held out her talisman, and said, "Look at me, boy."

He turned his head and blinked at her. She moved the green glass slightly, so that it blocked her view of his nose, and went on, "As an outlaw, you will belong to anyone who chooses to kill or claim you. Best let it be me. I can bandage you, feed you, clothe you, and in some measure protect you from any ruffians who would try to harm my slave."

Self-found moaned again, but made little other protest.

Mad Evren's third client came near sunset.

A venerable wizard with white beard hanging to his waist, white brows cragging out over his eyes, and little but wrinkles in between, he looked older, possibly, than Evren herself. But clean, well-groomed. From beneath the peaked purple hat, his hair fell down in lustrous white curls over his shoulders, his forehead soared up furrowed with only the lines of ponderous thought; and from deep within the crows' nests between brows and cheekbones, his bright eyes peered out black, gray, and white, without a trace of bloodshot or yellowing. When he opened the slit in his beard that was his mouth, a full set of teeth glinted ivory in the light of Evren's lamp.

He said, "I am the great Somaasyern. My crystal bade me come to you."

"Drop the curtain," she replied.

He did so, more as if bestowing a favor than obeying an order, and went on, "My ravens tell me that of all swampsearchers, you are the most diligent. My cards say that of all antique talismans, you find those with the most potent inscriptions."

"You could have heard that from any fairgoer. But judge for yourself." Chuckling, she brought out a partitioned coffer filled with items even rarer than those she had offered Jahtan's devotee. As Somaasyern lifted them from their silk-padded cubicles to frown at them beside the lamp, Mad Evren searched her dreams yet again.

A proud old oak tree, still branching green on the edge of a cliff. Some of its roots fed on open air, and white eagles made their nests in them, to hatch worlds out of small pearl eggs. Lightning struck the oak, and it blazed up blue against the crimson-clouded sky. Evren had thought of this dream off and on throughout the day, waiting for its fulfillment.

"This one, perhaps," said the

Artwork by Alicia Austin

wizard. "Your price, woman?"

"Well, well, let me see it."

He affected nonchalance, but she could sense that, having found it, he disliked giving it up for even a moment.

She had found it many years ago, in a swamp-submerged temple of learning near the very edge of Green Glass Lake's bottom. It was part of a tiny codex, no taller than the joint of her thumb. The ancients had been fond of tiny volumes, and occasionally one could still be found whole, though ready to crumble at a touch; but this one had been torn apart and then encased like an insect in a preserving bubble of stuff much like the green glass. One cover, part of the back, and pages impossible to count because they were fused together in the glassy substance. Only the top remaining page could be read.

Evren remembered this find well. Even as she had made it, a yellow-glowing fish larger than a bull emerged from an eddy of mud and swam toward her, its jaws agape with translucent teeth and its front fins dangling like broken arms. She had still had a minute of breath in her lungs, and might have snatched up other valuables besides the half-book, had it not been for that close pursuit. It had inspired her to learn more of the ancient languages, so as to read what had nearly cost her life.

Rendered into modern speech, these lines meant, more or less:

"He made a circle around himself to keep us away.
Alone and aloof, he scorned us both.
But we were too clever to give him his way.
Our circle stretched around him and us both."

"How much, old woman?" Somaasyern repeated.

"For this, from you: your purse and everything in it."

He stood. "Outrageous! That piece is hardly the key to rulership of the world, old woman!"

"Nor even to rulership of yourself, old man. Nevertheless, be grateful that I do not demand your crystal, your cards, and the rings on your fingers as well."

"I want it only for ..." The wizard caught his words in midsentence and pulled his velvet purse from the folds of his robe. "Two large rubies. That is more than any talisman is worth, ancient or modern."

"Use your rubies instead of the talisman, then."

"The rubies, one emerald, and a pearl."

"Your purse, old man, and everything in it."

In the end, he met her price and took away the talisman. Counting his many jewels, Mad Evren felt that she had not lost too badly in the exchange. Though perhaps she should have asked for that intaglio ring on his right forefinger, as well.

Iamas Self-found's benefactress had neither wagon nor tent, nothing but an overhanging ledge of riverbank to shelter her lonely camp. Here she had dug a small firepit, made a bed of dried grasses, cached a leather bag from which she produced soap to wash his welts, salve to rub them with, nut juice to darken his complexion, a brown robe to cover his nakedness, and herbs to season the fish and roots she roasted on fire-heated rocks. She added herbs to their mulled white wine, also. Iamas thought she added exactly the same herbs to both cups, so perhaps it was merely the warmth and sense of relative well-being, so unexpected after the events of his morning and afternoon, that made him languorous as he followed her back to the fairground just after nightfall.

Her salve reduced the pain to little more than lingering tenderness, so he could walk without support; and the gate guard passed them through with no visible suspicion that here was the man outlawed earlier that day. As they wound through the fair without incident, Iamas felt safer and safer. Several times he even ventured to raise his head and glance about.

Ythis Kasath'at had told him that they were going to visit a powerful friend, one who would mend his fortune. He did not question her until they arrived at a wizard's tent and found it dark and silent, with a placard across the door warning that the occupant was to be left undisturbed.

It was the tent of Somaasyern, whom many called one of the greatest wizards ever to live. Iamas had considered stopping here this morning, on this way from Mad Evren's tent to Anzhara's, but the placard had been in place even then. Wondering if Somaasyern would have betrayed him to the guards, he whispered, "We'd better come back later."

Ythis replied, "We are the clients Somaasyern expects. He has hung this placard to protect our privacy as well as his own."

Lifting placard and curtain, she waved for Iamas to go first. Hesitantly, he obeyed. It was like entering a deep cave. He knew that the fair outside was thick with evening bustle and lanterns outshining the full moon, yet none of it, neither light nor noise, seeped through the cloth tent walls.

Ythis stepped in after him, dropped the curtain with a swish — and Iamas blinked. All at once the tent's interior blazed with light and sound.

Seven glass-shaded lamps, in every color of the rainbow, shone from chest-high lampstands around the middle of the tent. Beyond the blue and purple lamps, the white-bearded wizard sat playing fanfares on a silver trumpet. After a moment, Iamas noticed that the lamps encircled a white marble tabletop set on black-lacquered trestles.

"So you found a talisman to cast the silent dark," said Ythis. "It works perfectly, Wizard."

"Good." Somaasyern lowered his trumpet. "But then, it ought to work. Mad Evren charged enough for it."

"It is much safer than one of your simple invisible barriers. They rouse suspicion. This does not."

"I paced the circle three times, rubbing the talisman in an unbroken spiral. No one saw you enter?"

"A few saw. None of them noticed what they saw. Nor will they ever, with no disturbance here tonight to prod their vague recollection. Now, if they saw or heard anything unusual from this tent," Ythis added, "then by morning half the fair, even folk who never came near us all night, would remember having seen *someone* enter, no matter what precautions we had taken. But their descriptions would vary beyond usefulness. Trust my judgment, Somaasyern. This is the eleventh year that I have moved safely through this fair."

Iamas was beginning to feel uneasy. He glanced around, but Ythis stood, looking placid, between him and the doorway.

"I have trusted you so far," said the wizard.

"And very safely," she replied. "I could hardly have betrayed you without betraying myself. The greater task in giving trust has been mine. You could have betrayed me, old Wizard, as easily as Anzhara betrayed the young thief this morning."

"At the outset of our studies, I could have betrayed you," Somaasyern replied. "Only at the outset. Is this the boy?"

By now Iamas felt distinctly nervous. His welts started prickling again.

"It is," said Ythis. "Yours for either

Jahveh or Shaitan."

Iamas turned to run, but the woman caught both his little fingers and held them tight. "Now, now, boy," she chided him gently. "You are still an outlaw and my slave." Then, speaking again to Somaasyern, "Well, Wizard, which path do you choose?"

"Which do you suppose?" Somaasyern chuckled.

Iamas liked that chuckle so little that he made a fierce effort to break free, and heard one of his finger-joints snap. The pain doubled him over, helpless, while Somaasyern came up from behind and threw a looped cord around his shoulders to the elbow. Ythis released his fingers then, too late for further struggles. Though thin as a leafstem, the wizard's cord was strong and sharp, and must have been enchanted, for it seemed to drain all the energy from the young man's muscles, leaving only his mind resistant.

The wizard led him into the lamp-bounded circle, arranged him flat on the tabletop and, with a curious twist of the wrist, threw down the end of the cord. At once it flew beneath the marble slab, soared up again on the other side, swooped once more over the boy's chest, and knotted itself to the length at his left elbow. Now that he was tied down to the table, the enchantment released his muscles just enough for a shudder. He barely noticed the throbbing of his whip welts.

"You are sure?" asked Ythis Kasath'at. "Having searched your soul, you are truly satisfied that you wish power more than happiness?"

"Woman, power *is* happiness!"

"Very well," she answered. "You know your own mind. Learn the ultimate secret of Jahtan's."

Beginning to chant strange words in a low voice, Somaasyern walked three times in a circle between the table and the lamps. They burned ever dimmer as his voice rose ever louder. Reaching his victim's head for the third time, the wizard stopped and drew a long knife from his robes. Still chanting, he raised it high. His face, upside-down from his victim's angle, showed no compassion, only hard purpose. Shadowy in the lamplight from below, it looked like a fierce, bearded skull.

Iamas wanted to scream. Maybe his jaw was paralyzed, too. Anyway, nobody would hear him outside the tent. So he tried to wait with dignity.

"Now!" the woman whispered. "Disciple of Jahtan, initiate thyself!"

Somaasyern ended his chant on a thunderous note and plunged the knife point downward in a flashing arc.

In that instant, something like sharp black thunder charged the air. Without hesitating in its circle, the knife swerved back up, barely missing the boy's nose, and thunked into Somaasyern's own ribcage.

There was very little blood, but Iamas saw the wizard's face contort with brief surprise just before he fell backward.

With Somaasyern's death rattle, the lamps blazed up bright once more, and the cord around Iamas went slack. He wouldn't have had any difficulty slipping free, if it hadn't been for his uncontrollable shaking.

"The great wizard Somaasyern has learned Jahtan's ultimate secret," said Ythis Kasath'at. She sounded well satisfied.

"Did you — did you know that was going to happen?" Iamas stammered.

"You worshippers of 'True-God' have no real understanding of Infinite Jahtan," she replied. "Our god rules all, with ultimate justice and some irony. Somaasyern could have chosen to invoke Jahtan for your benefit and healing. He would have received power to use for good. He chose to seek power for any purposes he wished, probably to rule the world, and he believed that he must offer blood sacrifice in order to concentrate such power." She laughed. "A concentrated ray of Jahtan's power does indeed move in this fair tonight, thanks to Somaasyern's sacrifice of himself."

"Then...who...?"

"Who channels the power? No, boy, not you. Nor will anyone else guess, tomorrow, what has happened tonight. How foolhardy it would be to leave a visible trail! Some folk will rejoice, some will suffer loss, but few will ever guess there was any cause beyond luck or sudden change of heart. And when they find Somaasyern, he will appear to have died of nothing more than an old, weak heart." Ythis extended her right hand, fingers out. A beam of white light grew from it, reached the dead wizard, and ruffled his garments. A bulge appeared over his chest, a small lump rising higher and higher until the cloth tore and a bit of glass hung sparkling in the light. Ythis turned her hand, and the beam carried the talisman to rest in the air a few inches in front of Iamas.

"I suggest that you take it back to Dame Evren, to replace the one that you stole from her and your judge from you," Ythis said pleasantly. "Give her our blessings, Jahtan's and mine."

Mad Evren was surprised when a fourth client came poking into her tent late that evening. Her dreams had predicted only three, and she had already dropped the curtain for the night and unrolled her mattress.

Her surprise faded away when she saw that this was no new client, simply her lad of the morning, dyed and robed like a foreign beggar. "Well, boy," she said, "*was* it you whom they took this morning for a thief?"

"Yes, Dame...And they kept your talisman. I'm sorry. But..." He groped in his frayed robe. "... Ythis Kasath'at sends you this back."

Evren took it, saw that it was the piece she had sold Somaasyern, and chuckled. "It circles home again to roost. Well, lad, did they outlaw you?"

"For a year. Until the end of next year's fair."

"Short enough to survive, in the right hideaway. I know a farm or two along Heartwind River where they'll hire outlaws and let in no hunters. Just lie you low here till fair's end, and we'll settle you at Rolling Pastures or Bountiful Fields."

She heated him a bowlful of barley broth. While he drank it, she found the piece she had offered him that morning, with the sheaf of wheat and the ancient farm goddess. "Well, boy, Interested in this one yet?"

He didn't speak for some time. Finally he said, "I can't afford it just now."

"Yes, you can, young fellow. All the payment I ask is the tale of how our devotee of Jahtan got this back from the old wizard with doom knotted all over his beard, and handed it over to you."

Neither of them ever had cause to regret the trade. Ten fairs later, his booth of farm products was already a tradition. And, each year, he made a point of purchasing at least one new piece from Old Evren.

✽

PHYLLIS ANN KARR was born in California, raised in Indiana, and now lives in Wisconsin in a county without a single traffic light. She says, "much as I like, admire, and appreciate the short-story form, I find it difficult to cram material into such neat, artistic little spaces." This doesn't seem to stop her from doing it well.

ALICIA AUSTIN was recently Artist Guest of Honor at Confrancisco, the 1993 World Science Fiction Convention.

He's an Old Friend of Mine

by Laura Higgins

Artwork by Margaret Organ-Kean

The sorcerer looked at the limp body in his arms with satisfaction. He had captured her in the dense woods near the falls. She was dressed but her hair was still damp, as if she had been bathing in the pool at the bottom of the falls not long before he caught her.

He carried her into his home and from there on into his workroom. The entire house was made of grey stone, but other rooms were lightened with tapestries or rugs. This room was entirely bare, except for the flasks and stones and various other magical instruments and materials he had set out ready for work

He propped her, loosely upright, on the grey, stone shelflike seat against the east wall, and began to dust off the six-foot-long rectangular stone, high as a table, that thrust up from the center of the floor. The light from the windows caught the disturbed motes in a gleaming, hazy dance around his salt-and-pepper hair.

"What is going on?" The voice sounded groggy but rapidly cleared.

"You're awake." He looked at his captive quickly and uneasily as she straightened away from the wall, hooking one arm around her knee. "Are you prone to hysterics?"

She eyed the stone table with resigned amusement, pushing the still damp hair away from her forehead. "No."

He would rather have had her bound on the table before she woke up, but there was no decency in lying to the girl when she could be using her last minutes in preparing herself to face God. "I need a virgin sacrifice."

The woman looked at him from under the hand still pressed to her forehead and suddenly laughed. "The story of my life."

He looked at her warily. "You don't seem very upset about it."

"If I'm going to die anyway, why spoil my last minutes and make you feel bad by being mad?"

He was still suspicious. "You aren't one of those experts in unarmed combat, are you?"

She shook her head, with wry regret.

Relieved, he began to relax a little as he took out a stick of red chalk, made by a concoction that included the undried blood of a baby rabbit, and began to mark the stone. "You don't know what a trouble it can be in my line of work. Not only are virgins far scarcer than swan's songs—"

"Tell me about it."

"—and the demand for them is up—"

"I have noticed that."

"—but what with that *City of Ladies* book and all that, half the virgins one can find know how to defend themselves."

His captive gave a grimace. "I try, but I've only ever been a mediocre fighter, and I see you've taken my weapons. May I ask you a rather relevant question?"

"I suppose so," he said generously.

"Is this going to be one of those slow, painful deaths?"

"Oh, no, no!" he assured her quickly. "Just a quick slice across the carotid, that's all. You'll be dead in a second."

"That does make me feel better."

He shifted uncomfortably under her steady gaze, a grey very faintly tinted with blue. "Well, it's not my fault!" he burst out abruptly.

Her eyebrows rose.

"If sorcerers have to use virgin sacrifices for their work, I can't help that. I simply have to accept it and get on with it."

"You'll pardon me if I value my life more highly than your work."

He looked hostile.

She lifted a hand. "It's not that I'm trying to slight your work, but I don't know anything about it, so naturally I value my life higher. Do you?"

"Do I what?" Distracted by her, he had marked the last line too light. Now he had to go back and mark over it.

"Value your life higher."

"That's a ridiculous question." This time he made the mark too dark. "If I'm dead, I can't continue my work, so I can't value my work higher."

"Ah—"

He concentrated on the stone and the blood-red chalk, but he could still feel her watching him as he completed the pattern. "Do you think you have the right to sacrifice someone else's life for something for which you are not willing to sacrifice your own?"

He lifted the chalk from the table and looked at her. "You know, you could argue a sorcerer out of his purpose, given time."

"It happens." She laughed. "I've talked several others out of it. The first one who wanted to use me as a virgin sacrifice is now a very good friend, in fact."

"Well, I can't afford to let that happen to me—virgins are too hard to come by—so let's get on with it." He stepped back from the table and reached for the ceremonial dagger.

Her eyes, where they had been laughing and relaxed, were now wide and serious. "Are you sure you won't reconsider?"

"*Yes!*" he said hostilely, gesturing her toward the table.

She put two fingers to her lips and whistled. Half the wall farthest from her crumbled under the impact of a huge body. The sorcerer whirled, in time to see the bright orange spout of flame as it enveloped him.

✽

Laura Higgins works as a teacher and translator of Romance Languages. This is her first published story.

Margaret Organ-Kean is one of the talented "regulars" in these pages.

Artwork by Gail Butler

Magic Thief

by Brian Larson

Scraper removed the cork and put her eye to the peephole. She had drilled the hole with her slim knife last month while the sorceress had snored her way through an afternoon nap. The old sorceress had had a cold then and an army could have marched past her hammock unnoticed.

She watched as the sorceress dumped a spoonful of purple dust into her brazier and hopped back. Nothing happened. Muttering, she went back to studying a leather-bound tome. The book was mounted on a teak reading stand carved in the shape of spreading hands. Her thumb vanished beneath her dark cowl, then reappeared moistened for page-turning.

Scraper adjusted herself in the cramped confines of the coal chute, tasting coal dust on her tongue. From high above her a breath of air puffed down the chute, smelling of the distant sunlight and grasses. She continued to watch the old woman in her underground home, fascinated.

The sorceress had returned to her brazier. This time she smoothed the folds of her long cloak carefully, which she generally did when attempting a more difficult spell. The smoothing of her cloak and the adjustment of the cowl appeared to put her in the mood, the way a smith might feel more at ease after strapping on his leather apron. This time she added green and purple dust simultaneously and with a flourish. She was rewarded by a shaft of yellow flame that loomed and instantly receded.

"Hah!" she shouted in triumph, slapping her bony hands together. "Come out now, little ones."

And out they did come, a ragged army of squeaking, fearful rodents. Mice tumbled from the recesses of the sorceress's underground home, each of them covered with glowing yellow stripes. With a whisk broom, the sorceress ushered them one by one into a wire cage .

In her hiding place, Scraper snorted quietly. She had been hoping for a more dramatic magical result. Then she frowned in the darkness, which suddenly wasn't so dark. Looking down she found in amazement that her hands were lemon yellow and glowing. Tearing at her ragged tunic, she found the stripes wound around her body. Her skin crawled and yellow light pulsed on the walls of the chute.

"I'm on fire!" she shouted, leaping up and climbing in panic for the surface. She looked back and saw the sorceress's eye peering back at her through the peephole. Heart pounding, she scrambled up the shaft to the surface. She reached the top and rolled in the grass. In daylight the lemon-yellow stripes quickly faded. Panting, she gathered herself up and leaned against the great oak tree that stood atop the sorceress's secret home.

"I wasn't expecting to catch a thief with that little charm."

Scraper whirled to find the sorceress at her side, her walking stick in her hand. Before she could run, the old woman rapped the oak tree with her walking stick and pushed Scraper against it. She fell backwards and the tree swallowed her. Her face and hands burned as she scrabbled against the rough black bark. Soon, she tumbled down to lie in a heap inside the sorceress's chamber. A pack of woeful mice watched her with gleaming eyes from inside the wire cage.

The sorceress came down the spiraling steps and smiled at her. "Didn't know all the secrets of my home, did you? Eh?"

Scraper looked around, but there was nowhere to run.

"So, thief, what did you plan to take from me?"

"Nothing!"

She stepped quickly forward, raising her stick. "Then why do you spy on me?"

"I—I only wanted to learn about your magic."

"Ah," said the sorceress, standing erect and nodding as if satisfied. "You came to steal knowledge. That is something I have in abundance."

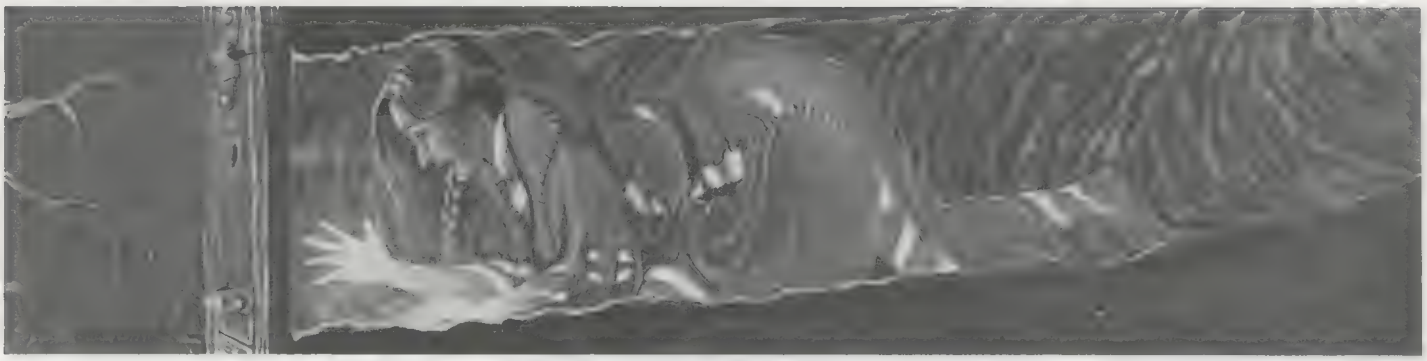
"No, not to steal," Scraper began.

The sorceress waved away her words. "It makes no difference. You will succeed in taking nothing from me. And I will never accept another apprentice, either."

Scraper bit her soot-blackened lip. "Why not?"

"See this?" shouted the sorceress, showing her an angry red scar on her left arm. "That is testimony to the treachery of my last apprentice."

"I would be a better apprentice!" she said, then immediately looked down,



Artwork by Gail Butler

ashamed of the begging tone in her voice.

The sorceress adjusted her cowl so as to better hide her protruding nose. "What is your name?"

"Scraper," Scraper replied, studying her hands. She felt relieved that they were no longer yellow.

"What kind of a name is that?" the sorceress asked, snorting.

"My father is a leather-worker. It's my job."

"You're lying," the old woman said, leaning near her and squinting. "I can see you're nothing but a thief."

"I'm not!"

"You claim to have never stolen a thing, then? Not from anyone, ever? Answer carefully, child. I'll know if you lie."

Scraper saw one of the old woman's eyes then, peering balefully from beneath the dark cowl. There was a gleam in it, and Scraper believed there was no sense in lying. "I can't say that I have never taken anything that didn't belong to me, but I am no thief."

"Well, forget it, then," said the sorceress, throwing her arms up. "The stairs are right there. Get up them before I thrash you, thief."

"Only a few times," explained Scraper. "Only pieces of fruit and scraps of cloth at the market!"

"It doesn't matter. Once a thief, always a thief," the sorceress said, tapping her temple with her walking stick. "Now get out of my house."

"No," Scraper replied, crossing her arms and furrowing her brow.

The sorceress's face became wrathful. She advanced on Scraper and lifted her walking stick.

Reflexively, Scraper held up her hands and formed her fingers into an odd multi-sided shape. She waited for the blow, but it never came.

"What? What's that you're doing?"

She opened her eyes and blinked in surprise. "It's a ward. I've seen you make the sign to shelter yourself from the rain or deflect an avalanche of junk from your upper shelves."

"But where are the words? I heard you say nothing to give life to it."

"I don't know the words, I only know how to shape my fingers."

"Well you're doing it wrong!" she said, poking at Scraper's fingers with her stick. She knocked Scraper's hands apart with a swift downward stroke, hitting hard enough to hurt, but not enough to break them. "If someone is going to steal my magic, they can at least do it correctly."

Absently, she moved as if to hang up her stick in the air. Scraper's eyes widened as she saw the stick dangle in mid-air as if from an invisible hook.

"Observe," said the sorceress. "You must form your fingers into a polygon, just so. Then give the spell life with the following phrases." She demonstrated and a shimmering shield of blue light enveloped her skinny frame.

Scraper formed the shape and mouthed the words, but nothing came of it other than another anguished cry from the sorceress. "You're an idiot! There is nothing for it."

Scraper tried again, clenching her teeth. A glimmer appeared between her fingers. In surprise she yanked back her hands.

"Here, here," chided the sorceress. "A hexagon works better than a pentagon. Try this."

The third time was a success. A weak shimmer reached as far as her elbows.

"Terrible," commented the sorceress, frowning severely. "Simply awful. You have a minimum of talent."

"But it worked!" Scraper cried, her mouth and eyes big 'O's of amazement. "I've tried that a hundred times."

"Do it a thousand more and maybe it'll stop something," the old woman snapped. "Now you must leave me. I have work to do." She turned her back and rummaged in a box of burnt-out candles.

"I won't leave! I can do magic now, I proved it. You have to teach me more."

The old woman whirled, her cowl shifting back a bit to reveal her uncomely face transformed into a mask of rage. "A thrashing it shall be, then!" she cried. Gnashing her stained teeth, she advanced on Scraper with her stick held high.

Scraper cowered back, knocking over a stack of dusty books. A family of mice that had avoided the sorceress's earlier purge squeaked in protest and ran for their holes. Reflexively, she threw up her arms and wove her fingers together. The words tumbled from her lips.

The sorceress swung her stick and it crackled as it struck her shield. A single snakelike wisp of smoke rose into the air. The sorceress glowered at the blackened tip of her walking stick.

Both surprised, they examined the magical shield, which glowed a strong baleful blue and reached nearly to the floor. The sorceress stuck out her lip in grudging approval. She nodded.

"You've made a mess of my workroom," she complained. She turned back to rummaging among the candles. "The first thing you must do is clean it up."

"Then I can stay?"

The sorceress made an impatient, flapping gesture with her hand over her bent back. "Yes, yes, of course."

✽

Brian Larson is a computer engineer by day and a fantasy writer by night. He's spent a lot of time wandering about England and Wales during the last few years in hopes that something of the fantasy feel of these lands will sink in. This is his third sale to *FANTASY Magazine*.

Gail Butler is well-known in the Northwest as an artist and a fan and lives north of Seattle. She is an ex-military-wife, musician, barber, and an antique restorer as well as an expert at drawing figures and animals. In her spare time she is a volunteer Jewish mother to Northwest art fandom.

Artwork by James Balkovek

The storm rose so suddenly, Anwyn Baldomyre had no warning. A wall of water seemed to descend from the sky, soaking the young harper through cape and clothes as he wandered long after night's descent, seeking shelter from the lash of elements and wind. At least the sercloth satchel was keeping Glynnanis dry, though the magical harp's musical lament was quite audible in Anwyn's head.

"I told you we should have stayed in the village," Glynnanis said.

"You also told me it wouldn't rain." Anwyn looked about the downpour for shelter. Lords and Ladies, he would not be able to see at all, were it not for the occasional flashes of lightning.

"I shall warp!" the harp whimpered.

Anwyn frowned, and wondered if it were possible that this damp would warp the harp's tongue. *Not likely!* It was the unicorn soul inhabiting the white wood that spoke to Anwyn's mind, a voice that only certain mageborn—like Anwyn—were even able to hear. He sighed and continued his search in vain. The trees were too thin in this rocky terrain to offer any protection, and there didn't seem to be any sign of a cave.

Lightning illuminated the world as Anwyn continued down the twisting road. *Glynnanis is right—we should have stopped.* Too late to care now. Another flash of lightning turned the world blue-white—and gave him a brief glimpse of stone pillars rising like an arch. He fled for them when a third flash showed him the rambling stone keep atop a rise.

Shelter! he thought. *Bless the Four!* He quickly made for the promise of sanctuary, hoping to find that a generous soul resided within these walls. He rushed through a gate that hung sideways on its hinges and entered a gatehouse. Under its archway, he paused.

"Must be deserted," he said. Indeed, now that he was under a stone roof, he could see more of the main structure in the erratic flashes of light. A stone keep, yes, but its tower had collapsed, and the upper windows were dark eyes on a weary courtyard rankled by weeds and broken cobbles. That did not stop him from noticing the shape of the doors and the stone statuary sitting to either side of the entrance. *Harps?*

"What is this place?" Anwyn said.

"I don't know," Glynnanis said. *"And I'd rather not find out. Build a fire here under this arch. We should be safe enough."*

"It's too drafty here," Anwyn said. He

The Demon's Lamentation

by Laura J. Underwood

was all too aware of the rain's cold trickle inside his clothes, and the wind that whipped through this tunnel only increased his discomfort. "I shall never get warm out here, even with the help of a little magic!"

"If you would make your sacrifice and become a true mage ..."

"... I could drive this storm away ... or ride it where I will!" Anwyn said, not bothering to hide his annoyance with the harp's constant badgering. It was an argument without end. Anwyn's silver eyes marked him as mageborn, but he refused to make the sacrifice to release his full power. Refused to give up his freedom and be a prisoner of his legacy.

"I have the Songs of Power," he once told his mentor, Rhystar of Far Reach, when the magister dared to bring up the subject as he so often did. "That's all I need."

The ancient mage shook his head. "You must do what your heart dictates, but you must never forget the potential you carry within. For one day, you may find that power will dictate what your heart desires. Would you not prefer to be the *master* of that need?"

"I already am," Anwyn insisted.

Rhystar merely smiled, his opaque, silver eyes gentle with mirth. "You are still young."

Anwyn pushed the thoughts away as he brushed wet copper strands of hair from his face. "Can you sense anyone in the house?" he said.

"I sense no one," the harp replied, but its voice carried a strange note.

"Any thing, then?" Anwyn said.

"Nothing," Glynnanis said in a flat tone.

"Then there is no reason we should stay out here and suffer, is there?"

"Perhaps," it said. *"I just don't like this place. I sense that something is wrong here."*

Those words were enough to tug at Anwyn's own sense of caution. Yet—he knew it would be futile to think he could dry and warm himself out here, magic or not. *And if I lose my voice, how shall I earn my passage through this land?* Oh, his skill as a harpist excelled, and with Glynnanis, he found his songs took on an ethereal sound. But tavern folk did not care so much for the skill of his fingers as the sound of his voice and the words of his songs. The bawdier, the better, he had ruefully noted in some parts of Lamboria. Out here in the tunnel, he could start a magical fire and treat himself to magical warmth, but hot or cold, a sharp wind would give him an earache and ruin his throat.

"I've no choice," he said.

Glynnanis shook, but did not respond. Anwyn pulled his cloak tight and drew the sercloth back over the harp's head. He dashed across the rain-splattered courtyard, dodging puddles and broken cobbles to reach the doors. One fell inward on its hinges from the barest push of his hand. Either it was well balanced, or the *what* Glynnanis seemed unable to sense was hard at work.

Inside, darkness greeted him. He dared only to step as far as necessary to get out of the rain before he paused. Closing his eyes, he took a deep breath and searched his mind for the Song of Light. He hummed the notes, letting the melody brighten him from within before opening his mouth to let the mage song flow. Light filled the air around him, scattering shadows and a multitude of scurrying vermin. Maintaining the song, Anwyn willed the light forward and high.

A few steps put him in an archway at the entrance of what had once been a great hall. Cobwebs hung like neglected draperies from high rafters. The wooden railing of a gallery had long ago fallen, but its stone counterpart on the opposite side remained intact over time. The tatters of banners fell down the faces of walls, looking like tangled hair. Still, Anwyn could make out a bare hint of their pictures under the thickness of dirt. Harps—many harps. They seemed to decorate everything. Carved in the face of the dais and in the stones of the low wall surrounding the fire pit. The arches of doors had been structured to look like two harps, neck to neck. Even the tiles of the floor, revealed by the wind that scattered layers of dust at his entrance, were laid in a mosaic of many harps. *Whoever lived here once must have dearly loved music, or minstrels—or both.*

At least, it was shelter. He could hardly find fault in the taste of whatever host had built this hall. Still singing his magical song, Anwyn set his things near the fire pit and hurried about to gather the broken wood. There was certainly no

lack of kindling here. When he had laid a goodly pile in the pit, he paused at its edge and ceased to sing the Song of Light. Darkness fell around him. Anwyn closed his eyes to it, reaching into his memory once more to find the Song of Fire. Once a day was all he could sing each of the Songs without resting. The Song set flames to the rotten wood. Soon his fire danced high, sending the shadows into a frenzy. In no time, Anwyn had removed his wet clothes and laid them out to dry. From the bottom of the sercloth sack, he drew his spare shirt, pleased to find it had escaped the damp. Even the inside of his pallet was dry enough when he rolled it out. Good. He had no desire to sit or sleep on the bare, dusty floor. Knees to chin, he watched his fire raise sparks to flit about and disappear in the shadows above.

He had no idea of the hour, except that it must have been late. The warmth of the fire began lulling him so his eyelids felt heavy with weariness. It was getting harder to hold up his head.

He had just stretched out on his pallet and closed his eyes, when a faint sound whispered softly from the dark beyond his fire, the hum of metal strings being plucked in a simple melody. Anwyn sat up, awareness returning. He searched for the source of the eldritch music of a harp that seemed to float from all around him at first.

Glynnanis? he thought.

"Not I," the magical harp replied.

The notes took on a clarity of proximity somewhere behind Anwyn. He turned slowly and perceived a soft glow of pale light shimmering and shifting over the dais. A ghostly form faded in and out, as though it were having trouble holding its shape. The mournful song grew stronger, and as it did, the apparition gained solidity. When it finally became clear, Anwyn crawled to his feet with a gasp.

It was a man, though from the glow that filled the air around him, it was hard to know if he was human or Thuathyn. Cleanshaven, with a gentle face, his long curling locks of grey were braided in a fashion not seen in years. His robes were the richest hues of blue, as were his eyes. *Not mageborn,* Anwyn thought with some relief. The figure was seated on a bench and, clutched between his knees, he held the harp on which he played.

It was the harp itself that sent a twinge of dread seeping into Anwyn's heart. The wood was blacker than a raven. The neck rose and coiled, ending with a gargoyle's head. Blood-red gems glowed in the eye sockets, setting a baleful stare on Anwyn that cut fear into the depths of his soul. The fanged mouth hung open as if frozen in an ethereal scream.

The cerulean eyes of the apparition

fixed themselves on Anwyn as well, and a smile spread. "Welcome, young harper. Welcome to Dun Clarsach," the ghostly figure said. "I am Colm Tobin, master of this house and your most gracious host."

"Colm Tobin?" Anwyn repeated with a frown. Why was that name familiar?

"Aye, laddie, the greatest harper that ever lived..."

Of course! Colm Tobin! Some years ago, when Anwyn was a child of six and his talents had just emerged, he'd learned his harp skills from an old Thuathyn named Nevin Daimhin. It was Nevin, a frequent visitor to Nymbaria Hold, who gave Anwyn his first harp, and each time the elderly harper came to stay at the hold, he gave Anwyn lessons and told the lad great tales of harpers from the past. Harpers like Colm Tobin...

Anwyn frowned. "But, you're...dead..." he said and felt fear rise again to weaken his knees. "Long before I was born..."

Colm tipped his head to one side, resting his arms across the top of his harp. "So it would seem."

"Then...why are you here?" Anwyn sank to his knees on the pallet under his bare feet.

"I lived here in life, laddie. Seems only natural that I should haunt these halls after death, don't you think?"

Anwyn had to agree. "But...why?"

"Oh, I'm not here by choice, I can assure you," Colm said. Ever so briefly, Anwyn saw the horrid face of the black harp shift its mouth into an amused grin. "Made the mistake of mocking a mage with no sense of humor." Colm squinted at Anwyn. "Well, I'll be, laddie," the ghost said and chuckled. "You're a mage with a harp!"

"Not really," Anwyn insisted. "I mean, I haven't..."

"Have care," Glynnanis warned, and Anwyn flinched. The black harp's expression turned quite ugly as though it had heard Glynnanis' warning.

"...used much magic lately..." Anwyn said, his voice faltering.

"Ah, well," Colm said. "Doesn't matter. I'm dead and well beyond the harm of your magic—except, of course, for this little curse."

"Curse?" Anwyn repeated.

The apparition grinned. "Aye, laddie. Being as you're a harper, tell me this. Are you familiar with a little ditty called *The Demon's Lamentation*?"

"I learned to play it when I was a child," Anwyn said. That was no boast. Nevin had taught the intricate melody to Anwyn, and used it as a test of the young harper's skill. "But what does that have to do with a curse?"

"I'm sure you know that every harper born uses *The Demon's Lamentation* to show off his skill against that of another harper," Colm said. "Well, the damned song has become my curse, and it is a foul curse indeed. Night after night, I am doomed to play the melody, over and over, faster and faster, wearing my poor fingers to the bone until the break of dawn when this dratted demon harp who forces me to play is himself forced to flee into the Stygian depths of whatever hell he springs from..."

"Long-winded sort," Glynnanis snorted.

Anwyn bit his tongue and took a deep breath to cloak his own amusement. *At*

Artwork by James Balkovek

least, this spirit has a sense of humor, he thought. "Is there no way to break this curse?" Anwyn asked.

"Only one," Colm said, his visage growing solemn. "I must be challenged by another harper. We must play *The Demon's Lamentation* until one of us misses a note. In life, I was never once bested at the song, and I'm too stubborn to allow myself to be beaten in death. But if another harper should best me fairly, my curse shall be broken, and I shall be free."

"And if the other harper loses?" Anwyn ventured. "Or refuses to make the challenge?"

Colm shook his head. "This demon feasts on the hapless fool, and I go on to play another night."

Anwyn glanced at the black harp and shivered. The thought of becoming a meal for a demon was not pleasant by any means. Yet looking at the ghost of Colm Tobin, the young harper's heart was moved to pity. *Nevin said Colm Tobin was the greatest harper alive, yet here he sits, a prisoner of some mageborn's curse.*

"Is the mage who cursed you still alive?" Anwyn asked.

"Nay, laddie," Colm said. "He's long since passed beyond the veil. It's only his curse that lives on."

"How did you anger him?" Anwyn asked. He was trying to imagine Rhystar calling such a curse in anger.

"I called him a corpulent boar."

"That's all?"

"Truth hurts some folk, laddie," Colm said with a faint smile. "He was as wide as yon door, and able to devour a roast pig in one sitting. He was passing through this land, and I gave him shelter for the night, only to have him swill several casks of my good wine and make the rest of my guests miserable with his boorish manners and insults. In life, I was a man who believed in giving a scoundrel tit for tat, so I told him exactly what I thought of him. He was drunk when he spat this curse on me. Said that when I died, there'd be a demon come to plague me for an eternity with my worst nightmare. I didn't take him seriously at first, for he was so deep into the wine. But then, the day of my death came, and with it came this demon harp. And so it has plagued me ever since..."

He slowly raked his hand across the black harp's ebon strings. The eerie notes sent chills crawling over Anwyn's skin. Those red eyes glowed like embers. Their malevolent stare fixed the youth as if to say, *"Do you dare?"*

I could do it, Anwyn thought. *I beat Nevin once, and I always thought he was the greatest harper alive.* On the other hand, if he lost, he would feed the demon. A frightful thought. He did have to remind himself that he had not played *The Demon's Lamentation* since Nevin's death some years back. In the time that followed, Anwyn never felt the need to test his own skill. So why should he risk his life for a man he did not know, except through the tales the old harpmaster told?

Because I have no choice! I cannot leave unless I do!

"Then, I challenge you," Anwyn said. "I challenge you to *The Demon's Lamentation*!"

The black harp's eyes grew bright with hunger and greed. Colm's face grew even more shadowy and grim. "I am bound to warn you, laddie," the apparition said. "The demon is bound to do what it can to distract you."

"Let it try," Anwyn said, hoping his boast sounded braver than he felt. "I've played through many a discourse in a high lord's great hall, played midst peasant folk and tavern revelers deep-rooted in their ale. I've played through the thick of brawls and battles without ever missing a note—and once, I bested my old harpmaster with this very song."

"So be it," Colm said, hope glimmering in his blue eyes before he leaned over his ebon harp. "Since I am the harper challenged, I shall set the starting pace. Tell me when you're ready, laddie, and we'll let the dirge begin."

Dirge, indeed, Anwyn thought as he made himself comfortable on his pallet on the floor. Seating Glynnanis between his thighs, he ran a soft stroke across the golden strings. A shimmer of sweet notes filled the air, sinking a certain calm into Anwyn's soul. Even Colm paused as though entranced by the sound. His blue eyes grew wistful.

"Ah," the ghost said. "Now, that is a harp worthy of a master's touch. Would that I had possessed a harp that played so sweet when I was alive."

"Thank you," Anwyn said.

" 'Twill be a shame to see the demon rend it."

Anwyn frowned.

"Let it try!" Glynnanis said with an indignant snort. *"I'll wrap its strings about its ears!"*

Anwyn bit his lip and sighed. He flexed his fingers and laid them on the strings. Already, he could feel the crackle of tension filling the air. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

"I'm ready," he said in a soft voice.

Colm's fingers plucked minor chords and started the rhythm at a slow pace, and Anwyn listened carefully to the first four measures before he began to play. An intricate, mournful melody rose from his strings. With his eyes closed to the dark world about him, he could easily pretend he was twelve again, sitting in his family's quarters in Nymbaria Hold, listening to old Nevin set the pace of the challenge and speak instructions in his warm, coaxing voice.

"No, lad, no. Don't tense your hands. You'll slow yourself down. Let it flow like water—that's the way."

So many words of encouragement and wisdom—words that still sang to Anwyn's memory. He flowed effortlessly through the melody and took up the rhythmic chords, gently pushing the pace a *little* faster. *No need to hurry. Plenty of time. Plenty of rounds to go.*

Plenty of rounds, at least, until they reached the speed at which Anwyn always lost the challenge to Nevin's greater

Artwork by James Balkovek

skill. It never failed to disorient Anwyn when the song became so fast that his fingers grew numb until he could no longer feel them. He practiced the exercises faithfully in Nevin's absence. Indeed, Anwyn often spent hours alone, playing the melody of *The Demon's Lamentation* at a swifter pace. Yet, Nevin would come, all smiles and encouragement, and Anwyn would swear that *this* time, he would win, only to fail...

Colm reached the end of his second round—or was it his third? It occurred to Anwyn that they had each played more than one passage through the melody. His turn had arrived again, and the beat had become that of a reel, still comfortable for the dancers. He listened as Colm picked up the pace and launched gently into the melody once more—and wondered just what sort of distraction the demon was apt to attempt.

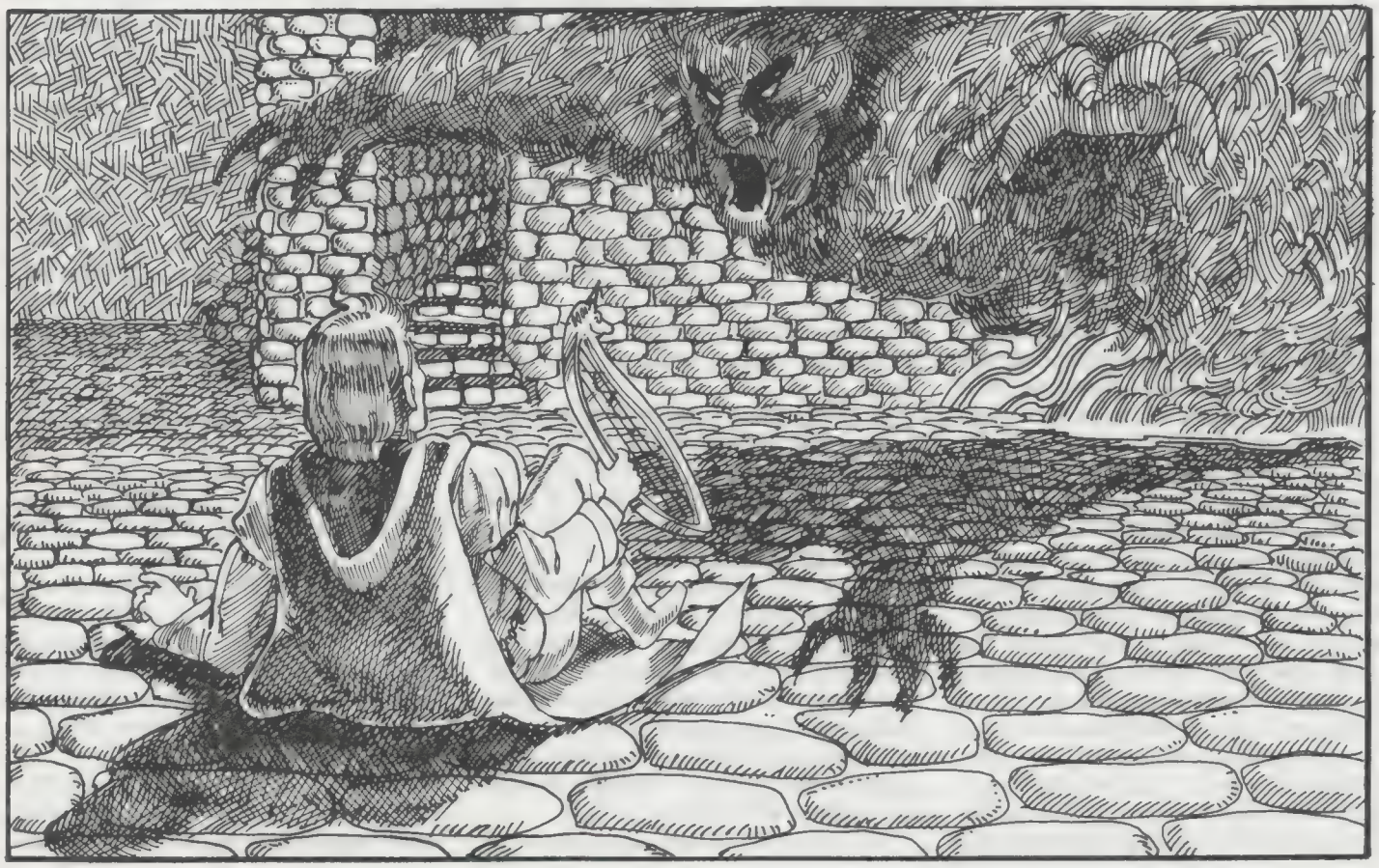
Nevin would sometimes try to distract Anwyn on purpose, coughing or moving a stool so it screeched on the floor, generally when they were practicing some particularly elaborate piece. "Get used to it, lad," the old harper would say if Anwyn so much as muttered a word of protest. "There will be times when your audience won't give a fig for what you play or how well you play it. You will even find some households just want you to play for them because it looks good to their guests. Learn to play to yourself—learn to play for yourself alone. Because if you are good, *someone* will notice."

So Anwyn strove to please and learned to close himself and his awareness of his music away from the world until he could play without knowing he did so. Closing his eyes was one way to escape. It forced him to know his harp so well, he did not *have* to see his strings. Only to hear the music and feel the metal thrumming under his fingers as it did now.

And perhaps that was why, at fourteen, he took Nevin's challenge and won. They were playing in the great hall of Nymbaria Hold that day, entertaining the High Lord and his guests. Then Nevin stopped and issued the challenge, there before the master's household, and Anwyn could do naught but accept or be shamed. The silence that fell over the hall that day was as deafening as a roar when Anwyn struck the first chords to set the pace. Faster and faster, back and forth *The Demon's Lamentation* had raced from mournful dirge to shrieking wail. Closer they came to the lick where Anwyn generally lost his touch. His fingers flew over the strings as he closed his eyes, breathing steadily, pleading with the Four to keep the tension out of his hands. To his own wonder, he passed the offending phrase, and went on to set a faster pace.

Nevin had stopped playing in a moment of what seemed like amazement—had actually missed his opening cue, and in his fumble to start the demonic melody, the old harper snagged several wrong notes. There was nothing he could do except stop. In that moment, Anwyn ceased to play the beat and looked up to find a wistful pride in his old harpmaster's eyes. The victory became bittersweet then. Anwyn burst into tears and felt so ashamed. A rabble of cheers broke the silence. The old harper's arms slipped around Anwyn's shoulders in a tender embrace. Words were whispered in the young harper's ears. "You have done well, lad," Nevin said. "I can die now, knowing I have left the world a greater harper than myself."

The words had meant so little to Anwyn then. He was mortified with grief over having defeated the master harper. Anwyn's own father was forced to carry him from the hall like a weeping child. Later, Nevin said his farewells and left Nymbaria, and it was several months before Anwyn learned the old harper had spoken true. Nevin had gone back to



Artwork by James Balkovek

the home of his birth and died peacefully in his sleep.

Grief so long forgotten was tightening Anwyn's throat even now as his fingers danced the rhythm of chords. Colm finished the mad passage and began a beat that was racing faster than Anwyn's heart. By the Four, he had passed several rounds without knowing, and had flown through the melody as well. Only now, as he began the song that set his fingers to skittering like spiders crossing hot stones, he felt a presence closing about him. There was a cough...a squeak...Anwyn opened his eyes and saw a familiar image shimmering behind a rosewood harp with the head of a bull.

"Nevin?" Anwyn stammered as he played, fighting desperately to divide his attention between the melody and the visage of his old harpmaster who now glared at Anwyn with such ferocity, he could feel his cheeks flushing.

"Surprised, are you, ungrateful whelp!"

"What?" Anwyn started to hear the harsh words, barely making the most difficult passage without missing a note.

"You call yourself a harper? I've known clumsy farm lads who could play better!"

Anwyn blinked, tears filling his eyes. *Concentrate! The challenge!* He shook his head and continued to play, notes whizzing under his fingers like maniacal laughter. What had he done to deserve this humiliation?

"You think you can beat me, lad?" that voice from his past said with unbridled rage. "You shamed me that day in Nymbaria! You made me look like a fool!"

"No!" Anwyn whispered, closing on the end of the melody at a swallow's winged pace while staring up at the ghostly face of his old master, a face that shifted unsteadily. Hot tears coursed Anwyn's cheeks. Nevin had never been so cruel.

"Ungrateful brat you were then!" Nevin said, as somewhere the melody of *The Demon's Lamentation* continued to flow from under Anwyn's hands. "I gave you my skill, and what did you do? You bested me! Shamed me! Play on if you dare! You cannot best me now! Your life will be forfeit!"

Pain filled Anwyn's soul. *Why try?* he thought. *He was always better than I.* The grief of that thought was becoming more than Anwyn could bear when, somewhere in the recesses of his mind, a voice sang a clear warning.

"Anwyn!" Glynnanis cried. *"Ignore him! This is the demon's doing! He's only an illusion! Beware!"*

The demon is bound to do what it can to distract you...

"No!" Anwyn snapped, as the rage of betrayal filled him. "Match this pace if you can, demon!"

His fingers ripped into the rhythmic chords, nearly doubling the pace of the song.

Nevin faded from view, as did his rosewood harp. Colm's face and figure returned. The ghostly harper gasped, and as his finger slipped, the black strings of the demon harp rang out with ugly sounds. Not a melody, but a dissonant noise that rose to fill the air like a true lamentation.

"I'm free!" Colm shouted. "Bless the Four, I'm free!"

Anwyn pushed Glynnanis aside and scrambled to his knees. The black harp's red eyes burned as bright as candlewicks in their fury. And as the young harper watched, an entity of black mist surged from the evil harp, hovering in the air and taking on the hideous countenance of a demon.

"Curse you and your magic wood, harper mage!" it said. "Victory or not, I shall still feast this night!"

Anwyn snagged Glynnanis close and drew back, only to stumble over the wrinkles of his own pallet and fall. Blackness with glittering fangs engulfed him. *I must flee!* In a panic, he called forth the notes of the Gate Song and thought of the nearest place to come to mind—the courtyard outside. Blackness surrounded him, suffocating him as he briefly lost his awareness of weight and fell into the abyss of the spell. Then hard cobbles thumped into his back and cold water splattered about him. His ears were rent by a hideous scream. Anwyn opened his eyes and found the demonic entity seeking vainly to flee. He shaded his eyes against the bare slip of sunlight that rose over the horizon. Around him, the rank odor of decay had him gagging on the sulphurous fumes that were released when the light of day ate away the essence of the shrieking demon. Then it was gone, a mere mist to be scattered on the breeze.

For several beats of his thundering heart, Anwyn lay in a puddle, feeling the cold seep through his shirt as he clutched Glynnanis to his chest.

"We'd better get up and go in," the harp said. *"This puddle will warp me for certain."*

Shaking with cold and fear, the young harper crawled to his feet and picked his way back to the door of the keep. There, he stood gathering what little courage and wit he had remaining, and forced himself to push open the door.

The great hall stretched before him, his fire lowering and letting the faint grey of dawn light the upper reaches. No demons—no ghost. He sighed and hurried over to the fire, shivering as he shimmied out of his wet spare shirt and into the dried day clothes.

He was rolling his pallet, ever glancing about, fearful that he might find another demon or apparition of the past, when he paused. Light from the window slits above had shifted to reveal the dais...

...and the broken strings of the old wooden harp resting on the flagstones.

"I'm free! Bless the Four, I'm free!" Were those whispers in the shadows, or just Colm's words firmly anchored in Anwyn's mind? Words the young harper would never forget any more than he could forget those of Master Nevin.

"I have left the world a greater harper than myself..."

Why should I want to forget? Anwyn quickly turned and gathered the rest of his things, slipping Glynnanis into its sack as he hurried toward the door.

No, Anwyn would never forget those words of praise that warmed his soul, no more than he *could* forget the chilling melody of *The Demon's Lamentation* reverberating over and over in his mind. ✽

Laura J. Underwood has had a number of stories published in previous issues of *FANTASY Magazine*, including several about Anwyn and Glynnanis. Her hobbies include hiking, biking, history, Celtic lore and music. She is now the owner of a harp, designed and built by her father, and modeled after the Glynnanis of these stories.

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Membership in **ASFA**, the Association of Science Fiction and Fantasy Artists, the group which gives out the Chesley Awards, is open to anyone. It costs $18.00 a year, payable to ASFA, P.O. Box 151442, Arlington TX 76015-7442, and includes a quarterly newsletter.

The Bottomless Pit

by B.W. Clough

At first Mrs. Buechner thought the little person in the woods was a neighbor—either Brian or Billy DeConcino, the twins from next door. Her own children were bigger than that. But the twins never did anything without noise, lots and lots of noise. And the short fat boy stood quite silent in the thick underbrush that edged the forest at the back of the house.

She finished digging the hole and pushed the first tulip bulb in. One down, eleven more to go! She stuck the trowel in at another spot to start the next hole, and it grated horribly against a rock. The flower bed was full of rocks, and chunks of wood, and even old soda cans and crushed styrofoam cups. When the house was built this must have been the builders' trash dump. Certainly no one had ever tried to plant flowers in this spot before.

"Drat it," Mrs. Buechner muttered, as her trowel bent. The rock was a big one this time. The dirt really ought to be dug over, and all the trash picked out. She wondered if she could persuade her son Abe to do it.

"Could I give you a hand with that?"

Mrs. Buechner jumped so hard her glasses almost slid off. "My goodness! Shouldn't you be in school, young man?" Then she adjusted her glasses. "Oh dear, I apologize—I thought you were one of the children."

The short fat boy was obviously a man—he had a bushy beard and a mustache. He wore gray jeans, work boots, and a knit hat, all rather wrinkled and dirty. He gripped a shovel in one calloused hand.

Mrs. Buechner looked him over. "Have you been sleeping in the woods?" she demanded.

"Well, yeah." The short man looked terribly embarrassed. "I was, um, working with the digging crew, and I took a nap, and overslept myself."

"You shouldn't be sleeping at work," Mrs. Buechner pointed out.

"It was a long job," the little man said. "We were digging for gold."

"But there's no gold mine in Reston," Mrs. Buechner said, puzzled. "This is the suburbs."

"Well, we must've got it all. I was wondering, if I dug this hole for you, whether you could, um, give me some lunch."

"Oh, you poor thing, I guess you did miss your breakfast," Mrs. Buechner said. "I have three children myself, and I can't bear to see anybody hungry."

The little man's eyes gleamed. "Give me as much as I can eat, and I'll dig a bottomless pit if you want. What are you mining for?"

"You got a deal," Mrs. Buechner said. Such a little guy, how much could he eat? "But I'm not mining, I'm gardening. I don't want it dug deep, I want it dug over. For flowers."

"Dug over," the short man repeated, shaking his head. "Huh. Times sure have changed. Okay, lady, it's a bargain."

"Just let me get this tulip bulb back out," Mrs. Buechner said, struggling with the bent trowel. After a tussle she pried the newly planted bulb out again. "Okay, go for it. I'll bring out a trash bag, for you to put the rocks and cans in."

"Rocks and cans," the little man said unhappily. "You sure you wouldn't rather have a gold mine, huh? All right."

Mrs. Buechner went inside, feeling rather pleased with herself. She was really much better at cooking anyway. She put a big pot of water on to boil for spaghetti. "Spaghetti and meatballs," she said to herself as she took a kettle of sauce out of the refrigerator. The little man couldn't possibly finish so much, but the family could eat the rest for dinner—there were at least eight servings.

Just before noon she went out. "Wow!" The flower bed was enormous. The dirt had been dug and redug, churned as if a bulldozer had gone over it. The trash bag overflowed with debris, and the bigger rocks that wouldn't fit inside were heaped up beside it. "You did a great job!"

The little man nodded. "I'm pretty hungry," he announced.

"Good! Come on in and eat!"

The short man sat down at the table and tucked his paper napkin into his shirt collar. Mrs. Buechner set a big plate in front of him. He stared. "What is it?"

"Spaghetti, of course."

"Never heard of it."

"Where on earth have you been? Everybody eats spaghetti!"

"Anyway, there isn't enough here."

"Not enough?" An experienced mommy, Mrs. Buechner had heard this before. "Abe and Rianne have eyes bigger than their stomachs, too. You finish that, and then you can have more."

She turned away to pour him a glass of milk. When she turned back, just a moment later, the short man was scraping his plate clean. "All done," he announced. "More!"

"Okay." She heaped his plate again. Again he emptied it like lightning.

"More!" Mrs. Buechner, hardly believing her eyes, spooned the last of the spaghetti onto his plate. "That's still not enough," the small man said firmly. "You got more?"

Bewildered, Mrs. Buechner took a tuna casserole out of the freezer. If she thawed it in the microwave...

Two casseroles, eight pork chops, a deep dish apple pie, and twenty hamburgers later, Mrs. Buechner realized she was in big trouble. Pretty soon every scrap of food in the house would disappear into the little man's bottomless pit of a stomach. "Surely you've had enough," she pleaded. "You've eaten two weeks' worth of groceries!"

"But I'm still hungry," he said indignantly. "And we had a deal!"

In despair Mrs. Buechner took out a jar of salsa and tore open a bag of corn chips. Maybe junk food would fill him up?

The little man ate four bags of chips, half a bag of fig newtons, and some hot dogs. Then he polished off two loaves of sandwich bread, with peanut butter and jelly between. Rooting through the empty cupboards, Mrs. Buechner was getting desperate.

Then through the window she caught sight of Brian and Billy, the terror twins, walking home from school. Maybe a solid distraction would help. The short man didn't seem very up to date. Stepping to the door she called sweetly, "Brian! Billy! I can't make Abe's Nintendo work!"

As one Brian and Billy flung down their lunch boxes and backpacks. "We'll fix it for you, Mrs. B!" they

yelled, loudly, as usual.

Mrs. Buechner turned on the TV in the family room and powered up Super Mario Brothers. "Hey, I'm still hungry," the short man called.

"Just a minute," Mrs. Buechner said. The TV was clearly visible from where he sat in the kitchen.

Brian and Billy threw themselves down in front of the glowing blue and green screen and seized the controllers. "Breep! Broop! Boing!" the TV said.

Mrs. Buechner came back to the kitchen and took some bananas out of a bowl. "How about some fruit salad?"

"What *is* that?" the little man asked, craning his neck to see past her.

"Oh, it's just Nintendo," she said casually. "Do you like grapes?"

"Sure..." As she peeled the bananas and sliced them she watched the little man out of the side of her eye. He observed the twins intently. Then he slowly got up from the table, and edged into the family room. "What are you doing there?"

"That's Princess Mushroom," Billy said. "Lookit, I'm moving to Level Two!"

Mrs. Buechner picked up the phone and dialed Mrs. DeConcino next door. "Hello, Liane? I just wanted you to know, I'm borrowing the twins for a bit. I have a visitor who wants to learn how to play Nintendo. You don't mind, do you?...I didn't think so. Sure, in an hour or so. Before the big kids get home, anyway. Oh, don't thank me! It's a pleasure!"

An hour later, just when the little man had learned to deal with the egg-spitting dinosaur-bird, Mrs. Buechner announced, "Brian, Billy! It's time to go home now!"

The twins groaned and shouted in protest, but clattered to their feet. Mrs. DeConcino had them well-trained. The little man said, "Aw, c'mon, just a little more, huh? Please? I just figured it out, how to jump on the egg."

Mrs. Buechner pretended to think it over. "Well, not today," she said. "My son will be back from school soon, and he'll want to use the game. But tomorrow, maybe. An hour of Nintendo for an hour of yard work, not to exceed five hours a day. A deal?"

The small man sighed deeply, and put down the controller. "All right, lady. A deal."

❀

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Shirley Jowise recently moved to Bainbridge Island, Washington after many years as a California resident.

Artwork by Shirley Jowise

Virgins Are Best

by Charlotte Brisbon

Dorrah shivered in her thin frock as she waited at the edge of the forest. Although the equinox had passed, Spring had not deigned to arrive on time, and so the morning was quite chilly. Dorrah didn't care. Today she would call the Unicorn and win her rightful place as High Priestess of Tir.

She lifted her arms and sang the Song. Dorrah swelled in pride at how clearly her voice rang out. She'd practiced tirelessly, and had finally been chosen because no other candidate had the tonal range she did.

Soon came the sound of hooves crunching through the snow. Dorrah relaxed, glad that the dragon Yegeth hadn't come to devour her. Yegeth had eaten all the girls who had tried in the previous six years. Dorrah told herself that she was the seventh candidate and this was the seventh year since the High Priestess Amana died; and seven, of course, was a magical number. She couldn't fail.

Soon the Unicorn came into view, and Dorrah finished the Song. For a long time she could only stare at the creature in reverent awe. Its hooves and horn had the sheen of polished cinnabar, and its dark coat gleamed like the moonlit ocean. Its eyes were jet black. As the Unicorn breathed, tiny flames spouted from its nostrils.

The girl knelt and lifted her hands. "Oh Unicorn, I, Dorrah of Tir, come to you in holy supplication. I have dusted the deepest corners of the darkest catacombs. I have studied the stars and planets from the peak of the highest temple, and cast my runes accordingly. I have sung the one true Song with the voice of a Priestess. Carry me forth to my destiny."

The Unicorn bobbed its head. "Are you a virgin, Dorrah of Tir?"

Dorrah blushed. "Of course I am!"

"Then get on my back."

Dorrah scrambled to her feet obediently. Her heart thudded. She wished she could see her parents' faces when they heard that the Unicorn had accepted her.

The Unicorn was warm and solid beneath her, and she scarcely felt it when they began to move. Dorrah held on to the creature's soft mane more out of habit than necessity.

The woods grew denser around them. Dorrah shivered in the cold, and she realized that they were going the wrong direction. "I thought we were supposed to be going back to Tir."

"Your destiny does not lie in the city."

"But—"

The Unicorn snorted softly. "There is a greater destiny for you to fulfill."

Dorrah contemplated that in silence. What, she wondered, could be greater than attaining the Priestesshood of Ti? Becoming High Queen? Or—dare she imagine—becoming a true sorceress?

They stopped in a clearing in the forest. Far to the north, Dorrah could see the mountains, purple against the sky. She got off the Unicorn's back to stretch her legs.

The Unicorn watched her. "Tell me, do you know why unicorns come only to virgins?"

"Uh, not really." Dorrah flushed in embarrassment. "Isn't it because we're innocent and pure?"

The creature whinnied and bobbed its head in equine laughter. "And naive."

"What—" Before the girl could finish her question, the Unicorn reared. Its tail and neck lengthened and thickened. Its soft hide hardened into scales. Wings sprouted, and two additional horns erupted from the top of a head that had grown suspiciously reptilian.

In a moment a dragon stood in the Unicorn's place.

Yegeth. Always a paragon of self-control, Dorrah did not faint or scream. Unfortunately, she found that she could not run, either. The midnight-blue dragon with scarlet claws and onyx eyes lowered her head until it was even with Dorrah's. "Virgins are best," she said, "because they are easiest for newborn hatchlings to chew." Then Yegeth grasped a fainting Dorrah about the waist and launched herself into the air, making for the purple mountains.

❀

Charlotte Brisbon lives in Arlington, Texas where she is working on a Master's degree in physics. She is an active member of the Arlington Writers' Group and this story is her first professional sale.

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THE LEGEND RETURNS THE LEGEND RETURNS THE LEGEND RETURNS THE

By the Lake, Near the Sky

by Alan P. Smale

A child, fair of face but grey of heart, came to a calm silver lake up in the mountains of Nali. Her name was Fiana, and she was the first to come here for a very long time; her mother's mother had been playing skipping games with her school friends and blowing the light, airy fuzz off seeding dandelions when the last young supplicant had passed this way.

For the road was not easy to find. Many knew of the rocks that grew around the lake like teeth, and the cloudless blue sky above it that was never reflected in the flat burnished grey of its surface, but none could see the signs and make the right turns and follow the right path unless they felt *just such* a sadness, or had known *just such* a heartbreak, or grown through *just such* an ordeal and yet stayed young. So the lake was protected from all save those who had lost a parent, lost hope, lost a life but remained alive.

Fiana wore blue knickerbockers and a pale blue shirt with swans on it, and canvas shoes and a cap. First she took off the cap, for she hated it, and buried it beneath a cairn. "*That* for my new mother," she said.

Next, she pulled off the shirt and rolled it into a ball and put it behind her. Comfortable now and prepared, she picked up three flat stones from the lake's edge and pulled back her arm to throw the first. The songs of Nali were clear: three stones, and then a wish.

Before she threw, Fiana thought of her father kneeling in the dirt by her real mother's grave. Fiana had been much younger then, and she no longer knew which parts of her memory were true and how much she had invented through the years. She thought of how her father had taken her hand and walked her back to the cottage by the stream, and the strange silence in their house where there used to be song and laughter and cheerful insults traded with quickness and glee.

Living alone had taken a worse toll on her father than even his first grief. Age bloomed on him like lichen on a tree's north side, its tendrils eroding him despite his steadfast determination to survive.

At the market, her father had gotten into a slow, careful conversation with a tall thin woman about aphids and mildew and garden blights. Careful and slow, and when it was over he nodded good-bye more respectfully than was his usual way, and Fiana knew that more than just pest lore had passed between them. The woman became "the gardening lady," then "Aunt Martha," and finally "your new mother."

The new mother was quiet and reflective where the old had been sparkling and vivacious, and that suited her father better in his new somber mood. But for Fiana, it could never be the same. Martha was kind enough, and the lettuce she grew was free of caterpillar holes, but Fiana had one mother. One.

Fiana whipped her hand forward and the stone spun out over the lake. It skipped once, twice, three times across the smooth metallic surface and sank out of sight. Blemishes grew where the stone had touched the water. The ripples expanded and merged with each other and formed a whole that slapped against the rocky shore by her feet, and spread outward and outward with no signs of diminishing until she could see them no more.

Something appeared to her left. Where there had been a rock, a woman now sat on the shore resting back on her arms. Her hair was matted and vermilion, like weed, but her face had a simple sweetness about it. Fiana looked again and saw a fishtail extending from the woman's waist to almost the water's edge.

"My mother baked bread, with currants and raisins, and let me eat it fresh from the oven," said the child.

The mermaid smiled graciously, but when she opened her mouth Fiana recoiled in alarm, for her teeth were yellow and filed to sharp points. Her voice was gravel and rust. "Bread! Fair things are not always as you would think them. Look more closely! Question! Get beneath the surface! Act your age!"

Fiana backed away and threw the second stone. It danced off the surface two, three, four times before the lake swallowed it down. The holes the stone left behind deepened into chasms and flowed outward in waves, and to Fiana's right appeared a woman with glowing eyes burnt into a harridan's face, all set on the body of a giant bird. Huge wings ended in coarse, unlovely feathers, and she gripped the rock with hard talons each

the length of a sickle. Fiana screamed and began to cry.

"Does your new mother cook?" said a mellifluous voice, and through the salt sting of her tears the little girl realized that the harpy was talking to her.

"Yes," said Fiana timidly. "But she won't let me in the kitchen."

The harpy's claws scraped against the hard granite, leaving fierce gouges that Fiana could have rested her arm inside. "A kitchen is not a playground. A stove is not a toy. Harsh things are not always as you would think them. Fly above your fear. Accept. Never grow too old to trust."

The mermaid slapped her tail against the ground impatiently. "Throw the third. Make the wish. Solve the problem." Her voice was becoming indistinct, and as Fiana turned she was just in time to see the sea creature dissolve into nothing.

The child looked at the stone, silky smooth in her hand. "Should I?"

The harpy's voice drifted on the breeze. "I can't say. When you make a wish you scar the lake. You pull the world your way. It is allowed, but: know what you do." And the air creature, too, became transparent and indistinct.

A girl with a stone stood alone on the shore of a wide grey lake, up beyond the known in the mountains of Nali. She looked into the distance, but could not focus true on what she saw there.

She reached back her arm and threw the stone. It flashed in a high arc against the blue sky and came down to bounce off the rocky shore, once, twice, three times, and skitter into stillness. The cool lake kept its counsel. And from the bundled-up shirt on the ground, two small swans fluffy as dandelion fuzz hopped out and onto the steel-grey water, and began to smooth over the scars they found there.

Fiana dug out her hat and went home, and became powerful and shrewd and wise, but not before her time.

❀

Alan P. Smale grew up in Yorkshire, England, and has been all over the world in the course of being a professional astronomer. He currently lives in Maryland and works at NASA's Goddard Space Flight Center. This is his second professional sale. The first was a story in A WIZARD'S DOZEN, a young adult fantasy anthology from Harcourt Brace.

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Going There

by Gloria Wall

Artwork by Ray Williams

I always watch from the roof of the tower when he leaves. They look so small and bright, with their shiny helmets and their red-and-yellow surcoats, just like a set of expensive imported toys all lined up in a glass case. They won't look like that when they come back.

The wind is strong today, so I clutch my cloak tightly around me — the grey fur My Lord brought back for me last month. But I'm still cold. I decide that this time I won't stay up here the half hour or so it takes until they are out of sight. Instead I turn away to go down the stair inside the wall. I hear the other women move to follow me. I'd like to tell them they may stay — why shouldn't they watch their menfolk as long as they can, when very likely some of them will not come back? But I can't think of any way to say it that doesn't sound condescending, or else like I have a premonition of disaster. My Lord's faerie mistress is respected, perhaps even liked, but certainly not trusted. How can I improve my command of the language when no one talks to me unless I make them?

The narrow curving stairway is dark inside, and cold. The slivers of windows let in most of the wind but very little light. But they have to be narrow for safety. The castle has never been besieged since I came here, but My Lord has told me stories.

My chamber is not far, since I have been given the top floor, the place of honor. I pause in the doorway, thinking of the fire within and the enormous curtained bed where I will lie alone for the next three weeks at least. My Lord is gone nearly as much as he is home, but that is his obligation to his lord, the price for the castle, for the moderate wealth that provides us with food even in winter, fire even in springtime.

I don't really want to go in. Even with the fire, the room will be cold. At home it is always warm...

... too warm, a hot kitchen made hotter by cooking. But we can't afford to run the air-conditioning unless it's *really* hot, a lot hotter than this. There's a pot on the stove — what was I making? After two weeks it's hard to remember. Green beans, that's it. And chicken in the oven. I peek at the chicken (a blast of heat to the face), decide that it's done, close the door and turn the oven off. The question is, how long have the beans been cooking? Five minutes or fifteen, who can remember after all this time? Stupid, stupid. I glance at my watch, which is not helpful. I think I only just put them on, so I go to set the table. Except maybe I should check the beans, even though it'll let all the steam out. As soon as I raise the lid, out comes a smell of burning. No water left. How could I be so stupid as to go There when the beans were almost done? I turn off the fire and poke at the beans with the wooden spatula. Can't eat these; they're ruined.

Here comes my husband, checking out the smell, no doubt.

"I burned the beans."

He doesn't say anything, so I carry them over to the sink and dump them in the garbage disposal.

"You went There again, didn't you?"

Not wanting to answer, I start scraping burned beans out of the bottom of the pot. I should never have told him about There — that was *really* stupid. But if you love someone, you tell them things, don't you? You can't have a big important thing in your life and not talk about it to the person who is most important to you...Of course when I told him, I didn't think it was real.

"Paula," he says, so I say, "I guess I'll have to make mashed potatoes," and turn on the water really loud, and flip the garbage disposal switch. The smell gets worse before it gets better.

It's hard to go about the motions of getting dinner with him just sitting there. I spill the potato flakes and nearly forget to put in any salt. "You could set the table," I say, and stand watching the pot come to a boil, listening to the precise clicks of plates, glasses, flatware.

My husband's voice is carefully neutral. "How was work?"

I smile at him, grateful for the turn of subject, then make a face. "Worse than usual. They had me alphabetizing a batch of old personnel forms." The pot is finally boiling, so I whip up the mashed potatoes and bring them to the table.

"Just two more quarters, and you'll be able to get a real job, something more interesting."

I don't want to talk about that particularly, so I say, "You working tonight?"

Artwork by Ray Williams

Artwork by Ray Williams

"Maybe later. I'd like to put in a couple of hours over at the Credit Union. We could use the money."

"You could use the sleep. We're not that bad off. Don't you have a test tomorrow?"

"Not until afternoon. I thought I'd study a little before I go."

He's pushing the potatoes around with his fork instead of eating them—he doesn't really like instant mashed potatoes. Now he's looking at me like he wants to say something, but I see him change his mind about it. "What are you going to do this evening?" he asks instead.

"I have to type my Modern Europe paper."

"You're the one who's going to be up the half the night then. You sure you don't want me to do it? You're awfully slow. I could print it out at work."

I hesitate, tempted. "Thanks a lot, but I have to do a rewrite, and I need to check my references. If it comes out too messy I might let you type it over again. It's not due until Thursday really, but I don't want to be up all night before the final if I don't have to be."

Which reminds me: I have to look over my books again tomorrow. You can forget a lot in two weeks.

"Paula," he says again, then hesitates.

When it's been long enough not to be rude I say, "I'm not really hungry. I guess I'll just get started." I'm actually not hungry at all; I just had breakfast over There. I wrap up my half-eaten chicken for later, recalling how we had to empty both our pockets of change the last time we went grocery shopping. I feel guilty about the beans. "When you're done, put the chicken away, okay?" I really look at him this time: I'm standing up, poised for flight, but really looking. If he wants to say something, I'm here.

He says, "Okay."

When I first told my husband about going There, he told me about an article he'd read that said dreams only take a minute or so even when they seem very long. That made sense to me at the time.

But that time I had a bandage on my finger for a week I didn't tell him it was because I deliberately cut myself over There. I wanted to see if what I did over There was real. I hadn't planned to cut myself that deeply, really. I always return to the same moment I left from, so it caused quite a stir among my women when they saw the cut healed instantly. I had to explain to them that I couldn't do that for other people, just me.

And then there was the time I burned myself making toast in the oven while my husband was at work, and fled There almost without thinking. The sudden appearance of that burn upset the household more than the miraculous healing had. That didn't stop them from dressing it with something cool and herbal-scented that worked as well as anything I had in the medicine cabinet at home. I think they decided the burn came from handling the household blessing cups, which I had been doing earlier in the day. Not that I hadn't touched them before, and I made sure to keep using them afterwards. I wouldn't want people to think I was cursed, or religiously unclean, or something.

Sometimes I think I shouldn't stay

There so much. There's got to be a price for living two lives. I wonder if I will get old twice as fast, and I imagine myself all withered and gray by the time I get to be forty. But what would you do if you had 650 envelopes to stuff and you could take a weekend's vacation in the middle with no one the wiser? Of course, the other 350 envelopes are still there when I get back...

I've been typing for more than three hours when I hear him come in behind me. He waits until I've paused, then puts his hands on my shoulders, fingers seeking out the stiff places. I concentrate on relaxing. He knows just where it hurts.

"I guess I'll go to work," he says.

"See you whenever. I'll probably still be up."

His fingers stop their probing. "Paula?"

"Yes?"

"Develop hasn't got an 'e' on the end."

"Oh. Thanks." Fortunately I have lots of correction stuff.

"I did the dishes," he says.

"That was sweet," I say. The dishes belong in my share of the housework by mutual agreement. Sometimes he does them anyway. It's a shame that neither of us cooks very well.

"I guess I'm off," he says. That's my signal to turn in my chair so we can exchange a quick kiss. I go back to shuffling around for the correction fluid bottle, listening to him leave the room, slowly gather up his things, open and shut the front door.

I've been typing for three hours and I'm not even half done yet, if I count the bibliography. Here's two more instances of "develope" and those aren't the only mistakes on this page either. I can't decide if I ought to start the page over or not. I've never been good at all-nighters, and I'm sleepy already.

I glance over at the bed, which nobody bothered to make this morning. It's strange how hard it is to sleep properly alone when you're used to having someone in the bed with you. But an empty bed is more attractive now, especially if I can sleep as long as I like.

It's not hard at all. I just have to focus my attention a certain way and...

... there I am, standing in the doorway, fur wrapped close against the chill, hesitating just a minute before I go in.

"I wish to sleep now," I say, and even though it is high morning there is no surprise at this, since my habits are notoriously peculiar. Besides (I can see it in their exchanged glances), they are figuring that likely I didn't sleep much last night.

They take the fur and the overgown I have on, and then I move to the stool before the fire and let them braid my hair while the cold keeps me from nodding off.

Then I climb into the bed, which is harder and colder than the one I have left behind, but just as empty.

It started with a dream. In my dream I was sitting on a stone, a rough-hewn rectangle, harsh against bare skin. Around me there was a ring of similar stones, but set upright, alternating rectangular and diamond shapes. There was nothing much else except grass and trees, obscured by a light haze. It was always too cold to sit there, especially with no clothes on, and I only had to choose for the dream to end and it did. So it never lasted for more than a minute or so, though I had the dream many times.

I don't remember when I first had the dream, but I know I was so small that my feet didn't reach to the grass. As I grew older it happened more often, sometimes even when I was awake — just a flash of cold stone and trees — which didn't bother me much, since it was so familiar. Eventually I discovered that if I chose the vision to come to me it would, but it was a pretty boring vision, so I didn't choose very often. Besides, despite the cold, it didn't feel very real. There was no reason I shouldn't move, bend down to touch the grass, rise and leave the stone — but there was no reason why I should do any of these things either, so I didn't. I sat and watched the stones and trees until I was too cold, and then I woke, or returned, or chose, or whatever it is I do.

I remember telling my husband about it before we got married, back when we used to tell each other everything. There was no significance to it then, except as a symbol of our trust in each other, that I could tell him something about myself that was so weird, maybe even a little crazy. When we got married we still had a year of school left, and we both had on-campus jobs, so even though we had pretty full schedules we saw each other more than most married people do — ate lunch together nearly every day, even took a class or two together. But then came that first time we were ever separated for more than a few hours, when he had to drive out to a couple of job interviews, had to be gone a whole week, Saturday and all. My school job was out for the holidays, and I thought I'd catch up on some housework, but about Thursday I ran out of things to do and got tired of playing solitaire. I finished the book I was reading and didn't feel like starting another. I settled down in the battered old armchair, and thought about...

... cold, rough stone; cold, misty air. Except this time something happened.

A footstep on the grass is a soft sound, but it was startling in the silence. A man stepped between two stones, and as he did, the mist vanished. It was a clear, sunny day, though still with a chill in the air, and birds sang from the nearby trees.

He was hardly taller than me, but broad in the shoulder, dark of hair, wary of gesture, one hand resting on the hilt of the sword slung over his red-and-yellow surcoat. From my place at the center of the circle I could catch a stale metallic smell, like the inside of an old toolbox.

He said something, neither soft nor loud, which I didn't understand, though now I know it is a greeting. Then he walked across to me and held out his hand — the left one. The right was still on his swordhilt. After a moment I put mine in it (the hardest hand I had ever touched) and let him help me stand. He looked all around us, once, slowly, took his hand from his sword, put it under my chin, and kissed me, very formally, like an element in a ritual. Then he let go of my hand and stepped back, fixing me with an intent, dark-eyed gaze.

It was only then that I remembered I wasn't wearing anything. Feeling a blush rising, I dropped my eyes to my bare, white toes. He took his cloak off and put it around me, and then took my hand again, and took me out of the circle, to the horse that was waiting, to his castle, to his bed.

It was all so dreamlike then: the round room, with the big fireplace and the curtained bed, the wary deference of the servants, speaking to each other in meaningless murmurings.

The things he said to me were also meaningless, at first. He treated me with the awkward gentleness of a man unaccustomed to being gentle. Except in the heat of passion, when he was neither awkward nor gentle.

Three weeks later, confronted by yet another breakfast featuring cold meat and warm, watered wine, I closed my eyes, wished very hard for Raisin Bran...

... and there I was in the battered armchair again.

I waken to the sound of snuffling and squeaking, so I sit up and pull back the curtains. Shelaya is sitting in the big chair

by the fire, nursing the baby. He always squeaks when he's eating, especially when he's getting full. He's decided he's done now, so she puts him up on her shoulder and squeezes him until his eyes bulge. He squeaks louder, but she keeps it up until he lets out a loud belch and a softer one, and goes limp on her shoulder.

"I want to hold the baby," I say, and she brings him to me. Even before I have his weight in my arms he gives me a wide-open smile and stretches happily. I have to hug him tight for a minute. Shelaya may feed him, but he knows who he belongs to. The nurse backs off with an apologetic smile. He sticks out his tongue at me, so I stick mine out at him, and we make faces at each other for a while. I talk to him in the language only he and I share in this land, I sing him a song with a different scale than the ones his nurse sings to him. His head is against my shoulder, his eyes blinking shut and open again. Then shut again. One of his fat little hands is clutching my braid.

I should probably go finish my paper before I forget what it's about.

He's getting heavy, but his skin is so soft against my face, and he smells so nice.

But now he's stirring and squeaking again, and there's a loud rumbling sound that I know what means. I give him to Shelaya to change, and tell myself to be responsible...

... though when I'm sitting before the typewriter again, it seems so silly and unimportant. Who really cares what an undergraduate thinks about the origins of World War II, anyway? Not even my professor, probably.

That good long sleep I got lets me see all the mistakes I made earlier. I *am* going to have to get my husband to retype this.

I don't resent Shelaya, not really, especially since she's doing this because her own baby was born dead. But I cried and cried when they wouldn't let me feed my own baby, and kept it up until My Lord had to explain to me that they believe the milk of a human (which I perhaps am not) will bind the child to human lands. Otherwise I could take him with me when I disappear, which faerie women sometimes do, at least in stories. Not that he knows any other faerie women, I am to understand; the stories are all he has to go by.

I can tell when there's no moving him, and this was one of the times.

They might even be right. They don't know that I "disappear" all the time, since I always come back to the same moment. But I haven't tried to take him with me, and even if I could, I can't. How would I explain him? What would I do with him?

We've agreed, my husband and I, that we can't have any children for five years at least. The insurance wouldn't cover it while we're still students, and then I have to work for long enough to pay off my school loans, and we want to buy a house. Then it'll be time to talk about it. It all made sense to me when we talked about it.

I had to spend the last six months over There without a single break before the baby was born. I was terrified of having a baby without doctors and hospitals and those just-in-case things, but what choice did I have? I wished I could bring some things across with me, like vitamins, or the books on natural childbirth I read through at the library. I should have made sure that I left when my husband was away from the apartment, because then at least I could have come back for a quick shower now and again. But I didn't think of that until too late.

But now I have a baby, and his hair smells so sweet, and his fingers are so tiny and perfect, and his eyes follow the sound of my voice. My son. And his. I didn't know I wanted that so much.

I'm just finishing up the bibliography when my husband comes home, earlier than I expected (it's only one in the morning). His blue eyes are intent behind his glasses, and tufts of pale hair are sticking up at funny angles as though he's been running his hands through it.

"Is this the last of it?" he asks, flipping through the stack of typed pages.

"Yeah, I'm getting done faster than I expected. But I'll have to take you up on that offer of retyping. I can't seem to spell tonight for some reason."

He makes a show of looking over the paper, but I can tell he's thinking about something else. He waits until I pull the last sheet out of the typewriter, and then he says, "Paula, we really have to talk."

I hand him the last page, and he shuffles the pages into order, then lines up the edges by hitting them on the desk. Thwack, thwack. He puts the stack down exactly an inch from the corner of the desk.

Perhaps I could say that I'm too sleepy to discuss anything, but that isn't true. Maybe I just have to get it over with. I say, "You're right. We need to talk."

"It's this dreaming thing, or whatever it is. It's getting out of hand. I think you should talk to somebody about it."

This isn't quite what I expected. "Talk to somebody?"

"There's a counseling center at school. In the psychology building. You don't even have to have an appointment."

He must really be worried. "You've checked it all out, I see." It comes out like an accusation.

"You ought to talk to *somebody* about it. Since you won't talk to me."

"I don't want to talk about it." I try to come up with what will sound like good reasons. "They'll just ask me stuff about my childhood. It isn't that sort of thing."

"Then what kind of thing is it?"

I can't answer him. I can't even look at him. I don't want to cry, but my stomach feels hollow and my throat feels full.

"I'd rather you talked to me about it," he says. "We used to talk about everything. I just want to understand you."

What am I supposed to tell him? That I don't want to be understood? That I don't want to understand it either? That I think it's real? That I'm seeing another man? That I wouldn't have done it if I had thought it was real? Would I?

He goes on. "It's getting to be a problem, can't you see? You lose track of what you're doing, you check out all the time. I *miss* you. Paula."

I have to look at him now. He sounds so sad. Our eyes meet. "Paula," he says, "it's just not *normal*." His voice goes up a tone on the word.

I no longer feel like crying. "Okay," I say, suddenly knowing what the right thing to do is. "I won't go There any more." Now that I've made my decision, it's easy to keep my voice level.

"But Paula..." His voice trails off uncertainly.

"It doesn't matter any more. It's all settled now."

His expression is caught between bewilderment and belligerence, but when I lean against him he puts his arms around me. I reach up to kiss him. "Let's just go to bed," I say.

He's a bit surprised — we don't settle our arguments this way. But tonight is different. Tonight I want to remind myself of the way he touches me, his gentle and lingering kisses, his smooth and knowledgeable hands, his unhurried delight in bringing me pleasure, his thoughtfulness which never deserts him. He knows when my legs get cramped, when my head needs to be supported, when I need to have space to breathe and

when I don't care about breathing any more...

I lie in the dark, listening to his breathing become longer and more even. His breath catches in a funny little snore, and then I feel like crying again, but I hold the tears back until I have gone There...

... and then I slide out of bed and stumble over to the cradle, catching up my baby to hold him close as I cry and cry, but quietly, so I won't wake him, tears falling on the pale fluff of his hair as I weep for the father he will never know. Who will never even know he exists.

But now there's a sound from above, somebody running down the stairs, calling out—her excitement makes her hard to understand, but I follow her back upstairs again, baby and all, heedless of my state of undress. I take account of it soon enough when the wind cuts through my linen shift, but someone drops my fur around my shoulders and I wrap myself and baby up in it as I look out beyond the long shadow of the tower.

A column of riders coming up the road, a banner, red-and-yellow. There they are, all lined up just so. Their horses are tired and do not lift their heads so high, but their helmets are shiny and their spears unbroken, and not one is missing.

We can't watch very long, since nothing is prepared for their return. I go downstairs and give the baby to Shelaya so I can be dressed and have my hair let loose the way he likes to see it before I run downstairs to greet him.

I must be first, but the others are at my heels, wondering to each other what could have brought their men back so soon. As I reach the courtyard I hear the panic in the kitchen (we weren't expecting this many for supper) and the bustle at the gate as they dismount.

Then I'm in his arms, hard with mail and smelly from horse, but refuge nonetheless. He's telling me something about a messenger, and a truce, and the fighting off, but all that matters to me is that he's here.

I don't realize I'm crying again until his gauntleted hand puts my chin up. "What's wrong?" he asks, and I find myself avoiding his eyes. His hand tightens fractionally on my jaw. "You've been There again," he says.

I should never have told him, but when you love someone you tell them things, don't you? He doesn't understand my obligations to another land, another man, but he doesn't expect to understand me. I'm a faerie woman, and what cannot be understood must be accepted, perforce.

No longer. I sniff back the tears and find the means to steady my voice, to make my pledge: "I won't go There any more."

❀

Gloria Wall lives in Mountain View, California in the Silicon Valley, with her four children and her husband Larry, who occasionally gets annoyed when she burns dinner because she is reading a book, but never minds when she forgets to cook entirely because she is writing one.

Ray Williams has been a professional (starving) artist for the last thirteen years and has won numerous awards for his work at conventions and art shows. He lives in Longview, Washington, and shows his work at the WIZARDS art gallery in Kirkland. This is his second appearance in *FANTASY Magazine.*

Artwork by Ray Williams

Marion Zimmer Bradley Talks to Writers: Grabbing the Reader

Your reader is always from Missouri — he needs to be shown. He won't take anything on faith or because you say so.

There is one reason for a great many of my rejections from the magazine: the fantasy content does not start soon enough. The reader of the magazine, if the fantasy content is not apparent on the first couple of pages, simply gives up, and will quit reading. Yes, there are exceptions, but you still have to hook the reader, and if he doesn't find anything worth reading on the first page it's a cinch he'll never get around to reading the second. You can't afford to let the reader get bored.

One of the things I read with most dismay when I was still submitting manuscripts was that *Playboy Magazine*, which of course has a much bigger slush pile than we do, hires an editorial first reader whose job is just to read the *first* paragraph of every manuscript, and either reject it or pass it on to the Editor in Chief. And though at first I thought that was God-awful, I know now it was really fair enough.

After all, if the reader is bored by your first sentence, he will probably never read your second. Reading — at least after you get out of the seventh grade — is supposed to be fun. If you don't like what's written on the page, you can always go and get a beer. The editor is competing for the reader's beer money, and if he finishes your story wishing he'd bought a six-pack instead, it's likely he'll never buy another story with your name on it.

Naturally that doesn't mean you have to start every story in the manner parodied by H.L. Gold on the ads for his old *Galaxy*:

"Bat Durston roared down out of orbit, jets blazing — "

Of course not. But you must convey something, in your first sentence, to make the ordinary reader — not just your own grandmother who will read it because she loves you — feel that maybe you have something he or she wants to go on reading.

In my writer's workshops I start by having people write a first paragraph which will hook the reader. Just a first paragraph. The surest mark of an amateur is to say in your cover letter, (or to me when I'm reading your story) that the story gets better as it goes along. Don't do that. Fix it first. If *you* think there's something wrong with it, there probably is.

There are all sorts of ways to hook the reader. One of them, of course, is the way Horace Gold made fun of, with Bat Durston blasting down on all rockets. The assumption is that he was appealing to a sophisticated reader who had grown to an age where he didn't give two hoots about Bat Durston blazing down out of hyperspace, rockets roaring.

My favorite of my own first lines is:

"Andrew Carr lay sprawled in the snow on the ledge, and realized he had come a long way to die."

That line was the opening of **SPELL SWORD**, the book I always recommend when people ask me where they should start reading the Darkover books. That's the adults; for teenagers, I recommend either (for boys) **STAR OF DANGER**, or (for girls) **HAWKMISTRESS**.

Once in a workshop I had everyone writing just a first line to hook a reader. The line I gave as an example was one I've always liked. I keep thinking I should write a story around it, and some day I will.

"She was seven years old and she was wearing a fortune in jewels."

Every now and then, I take that line out and look at it. Who was she, and why was she wearing a fortune in jewels? I won't know until I write the story.

Here's another of my favorites. I've remembered it for thirty years, so it must have had something.

"He was born with the devil's own good looks and a sense that the world was mad."

That one is from **CAPTAIN BLOOD** by Rafael Sabatini, or perhaps from his equally good **SCARAMOUCHE** (details are hazy after thirty years).

There are other memorable ones.

"I remember the whole beginning as a series of little flights and drops, a whole succession of the right throbs and the wrong." Recognize it?. Probably the best ghost story ever written, Henry James' **TURN OF THE SCREW**, with a heroine who — like the heroine of **REBECCA** — is never named. (Most writers couldn't get away with this; they need names to make their characters real. I guess when you are a truly readable writer — like Daphne du Maurier or Henry James — people will be interested enough in your characters to care about them even without a name.)

The fantasy content must be apparent on the first couple of pages; and that's why I often reject a story where someone is called a sorceress but for all we see, she might as well be a shepherdess or a lady plumber. What is the point of calling someone a magician if we never see any magic? Don't just say the dragon breathes fire. We need to *see* the flames and *feel* the heat.

And if your story is fantasy — let us feel the magic. Don't spend forty pages with a character doing mind-numbingly ordinary things and on the last page or in the last line show us that the guy was dead all along and so it was really a ghost story. I'm from Missouri; show me. ✽

Writers Talk Back: Promoting Your Story

by Lawrence Schimel

Recently, a writer who had made her first sale to the latest Darkover anthology wrote to Marion and asked if she could help promote the book in her home state when it came out. Knowing I had done a fair amount of publicity when my own first story came out in **SWORD AND SORCERESS VII**, Marion asked me to write a column about some of my experiences which might be of use to her readers.

My first experience with self-promotion happened because of my younger sister. **SWORD & SORCERESS VII** was released when I was home from college on Thanksgiving break. I was shopping for gifts with my sister, when she went into a bookstore and turned all the copies of **SWORD & SORCERESS VII** face out on the shelves. I thought it was a great idea, and started facing out the anthologies whenever I saw them. It was only later I learned that it drives bookstore employees bonkers when people come in and tamper with their shelf arrangements. What was left for me to do now? The answer, I found, was signing.

Many bookstores are more than happy to have authors come in and sign stock. These books will usually be turned face out on the shelf by the bookstore, and often will have a "Signed by the Author" sticker placed on them, or a sign nearby. This can sometimes cause confusion with an anthology, since they do not have a "Signed by a Contributor" sign, and people sometimes think it is the editor who signed the book. I sign on the title page of my story, leading buyers on a wild chase to find the signature. One way to help avoid confusion is to initial the table of contents next to the title of your story.

However, please ask someone (usually the manager) before you do anything. Some bookstores will only want you to sign a few copies. In one of the Barnes and Noble Superstores, the manager remarked that, "People don't believe the author was really here when they pick up a book that's already signed." However, he wanted to arrange for me to come in and do a store-sponsored signing later in the year, which generates a lot more publicity!

Make sure to always have identification with you when approaching bookstore personnel to sign stock. While backpacking through Europe last summer, I was robbed in Amsterdam on the last day of my trip. Passport, driver's license, the works. Later in the day, while wandering around the city waiting for the U.S. Embassy to finish processing a new passport, I came across The American Bookstore, which happened to have copies of some anthologies I was in. This will cheer me up, I thought, as I went inside intending to sign copies. Who would've thought I'd find copies of them over here?

Who would think the author would show up here, was the manager's question. I must admit it sounded slightly suspect: someone coming in off the streets and claiming to be an author, spinning this wild yarn of having been robbed that morning to account for his lack of identification. Fortunately, a number of my stories had been translated into Dutch and I was so familiar with the SF publishing scene in both the US and the Netherlands he was convinced I simply had to be who I claimed. But make it easier on yourself and bring ID.

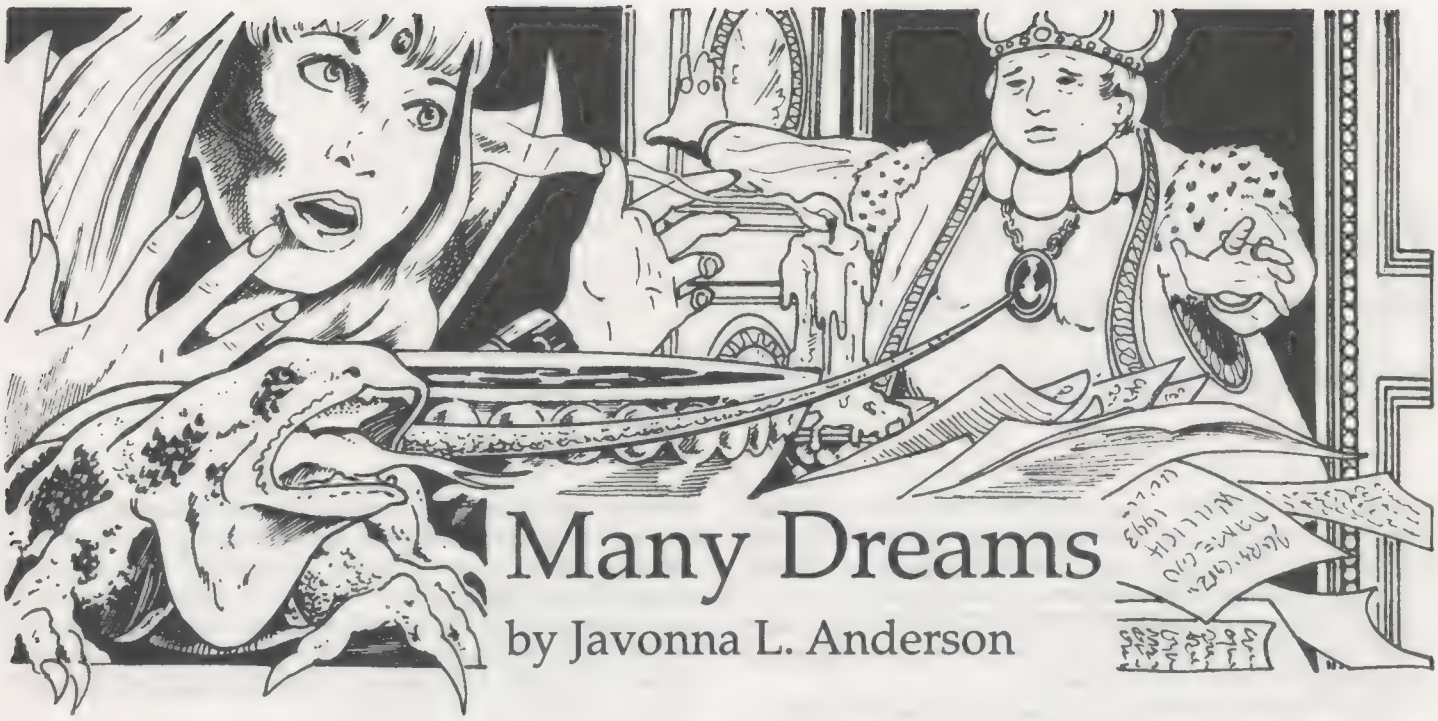
The "buzz" or "high" from signing stock wears off quickly. It's highly anonymous. Writing as an act tends to be very isolating: the writer works alone, sends his work by mail to an editor he has likely never met, etc. A public reading, however, can give you immediate audience feedback. Bookstores, especially independents or specialty bookstores, will often set up readings. Other candidates for sponsors include local libraries and universities.

And don't forget your Alma Mater. Going back for a reunion? If the school has a science fiction club, contact them in advance to try and arrange a reading. Many universities, and even high schools, review alumni works in their in-house magazines and newsletters; they may even decide to run a profile.

Local newspapers are likewise interested in their local authors. Don't look down your nose at the small village or town newspapers. A profile in one of those venues is likely to be noticed by the folk you encounter in your daily life; you might just wind up fulfilling your celebrity fantasy of having someone come up to you in the supermarket and ask for your autograph! Or perhaps it will be read by someone with a local radio or TV show, who might want you as a guest.

If you do a reading, don't be afraid to help with the publicity. Talk with the people involved to find out what they will be doing to promote the event, and don't be afraid to make suggestions. Send press releases to all the local newspapers, magazines, radio stations, etc. Make up flyers at your local copy shop which you can post in the windows of various stores and on the telephone poles, etc, in the area where the reading will be held. Leave small stacks of them at area public libraries for people to pick up, and if you're feeling motivated, leave copies in the libraries of your local high schools, many of whose students are probably interested in fantasy and science fiction.

In short, my best advice to you is don't be shy. A lot of stories are published each year, and it's very difficult for any reader to keep up. Chances are, without something to call attention to it, your story will go by unnoticed. That's not how things should be. Your story has been published, and you want people to read and enjoy it. Call attention to it; go forth and promote! ✱



Many Dreams

by Javonna L. Anderson

I was attempting a scry when he burst into my room, scattering papers and sending my familiar, Haldoon, into a hissing fury.

"Mhraine," he said, gasping.

"You are rather fat to be hurrying," I countered. "Even your physician would tell you so, if you would only listen."

He gulped air for several moments before continuing as if I had never spoken. "Mhraine," he said, "you must do this for me."

"Why?"

"You must. I simply must have Ynessia."

"She will never select you over her hordes of handsome young suitors. What do you expect me to do about that?"

"But you, you are a mage. A Master," he added significantly.

I waited.

He pouted a moment. Once, that might have moved me. When he received no response, he actually begged.

I watched him from behind my desk.

"Anything, Mhraine," he said. "Anything."

"Even this?" I whispered, holding up my manacled wrists for him, knowing, already hearing, the familiar response —

"Even," he said softly, "that. Yes."

I sat very still through his demands, amazed that the chit had captivated him so much as that.

King Karis's orders were quite simple, actually. I had the space of one month to make him the most attractive man in the kingdom so that he would win the heart of the Lady Ynessia. I would have to employ magical means, of course, because King Karis was well beyond middle age, and had never been particularly handsome. He had never even been particularly memorable, now that I thought logically about the matter.

But he had been...something. Once, long ago.

Mhraine, you are too valuable to me, to the nation, he'd said, lifetimes before. *I cannot let you go.*

I will not leave you, I swore passionately.

But how can I be certain? You have such great power, Mhraine, and one day you may draw the attention of other great mages who would take you, seduce you from my side.

Never. You are my only love.

Except for your power.

No —

Give up a part of it for me, he'd said. *Just enough that they will not find you here. That way I may be certain that you love me forever.*

I...

I will defy them all for you, Mhraine. I will make you my wife, despite the wishes of the Council. But I must know you will not leave me defenseless before them.

He waited before me on his knees. I could only nod dumbly, relinquishing a portion of what I might have been. When my tears cleared, he had already fastened the iron on my wrists. I felt the weight drawing me down, down to my knees beside him. Trembling wildly, I looked up. *No...* I moaned.

They will shield you from magical sight, he said softly. *They live off your own power. You will seem to have the powers of a hedge wizard. And, if you leave this palace with them still in place, you will be dead before you go ten paces.*

I have too many enemies to rely merely on love for my protection, Mhraine, and the people would never accept my marriage to a witch.

Don't think of killing me for freedom, either. Placed on with both our permissions, they must be removed the same way.

All that was very long ago, I reminded myself sternly.

Karis would have to be handsome now. At barely sixteen, the beauty of the Lady Ynessia was already legendary, according to the bards, at any rate. Hair of spun sunlight and eyes the deep blue of sapphires were only the smallest parts of a package designed to haunt the dreams of men. An angel's voice and temperament were among her more lauded talents. She had best be beautiful, because her family was teetering on the edge of ruin. Beauty or mage talent were the only two solutions I knew to that difficulty.

Late last season, a new bard had arrived at the court. He was a handsome fellow, and though much pursued by the younger ladies, he sang of nothing but Ynessia. After some prodding by the king, the youth even produced a miniature of the girl, and the king had been inconsol-

able ever since. He dashed off an invitation to her and her family to come and discuss "diplomatic relations".

Last month, the message arrived that they would come. The import of that message had even reached Haldoon and me in our desolate suite. I had thought at the time that Karis didn't have a chance with the girl.

I made a grand show of preparation; since Karis and the others knew relatively little of my Art, showmanship was the most vital quality. I requested several expensive items, out of spite and in another attempt to test his resolve. I was amazed again at the depths of both.

The days flew. Twenty-four hours before she was to arrive, Karis was frantic with worry. Only then did I summon him.

"It is ready," I said solemnly.

He stared at all the implements in surprise. "What must be done?"

"Oh, many, many, things..."

I humiliated him in several ways that morning, and he almost knew it. I saw the understanding glimmering on the edges of his mind, but he was never certain. We discussed each proposed change in detail as the hours passed — more and darker hair, firmer skin, fewer wrinkles, more teeth, more prominent cheekbones, firmer chin, more distinctively-colored eyes, better musculature — everything required to make him a vision, a young hero-king.

Exhaustion showed on both of us, and even Haldoon was less energetic than normal before we finished. As the sun lit my window for the second time, I finally uncovered the huge mirror that I had ordered and spoke the keying phrase.

My powers and his demands had outdone themselves. Reflected in the mirror was a youthful man, perhaps thirty, perfectly proportioned, bright-eyed and dashing, with just a hint of a rogue in the half-smile he gave to us. This was a man of many dreams, to be certain.

Karis turned before the mirror, though I had to remind myself that it was indeed him. "The finest gift," he murmured softly. "Oh, yes, she will have me now. Mhraine, you are amazing."

Silently, I held out my hands to him. After a moment, he even noticed.

"When removed," he said, "the geas will still be on you. You may not attempt revenge."

"Nothing I do will harm you," I said, staring hard at him. Moments later he nodded. Taking the manacles in his hands — his new, strong hands — he whispered a word. Their clattering to the floor roused us both.

He left me without another word, to greet his new lady.

I rode away from the palace later that week, as the sun was setting on the festivities. We traveled lightly, Haldoon and I and the three horses, our bags filled with the oddities I had requested of the besotted king. I had to be far from here by morning.

I knew that, sometime during the banquet, in the middle of the night perhaps, or whenever he was most occupied with the beauty of his lady, his mind would inevitably drift away from his own appearance.

And that would be that, since I had cued the spell to his hopes, his desires, and his dreams. When he began to grow tired, his heart would wobble in his chest, each breath would wheeze and burn into his lungs, and his arms would tremble with fatigue. Then, when he finally remembered that he was really an old man, the spell would end. I hoped that it would last almost through the wedding night. Almost.

Such are the powers of the Master, when the Master is an Illusionist. Pity he had never asked.

♣

JAVONNA L. ANDERSON grew up on a farm in Illinois in a family of avid readers. She is 26 and has a BA in Biology, a Masters in Engineering and Policy, and a JD (but insists that she is not a professional student). Her husband, Dagvin, aspires to be a jet pilot, and Javonna aspires to have the same address for three years in a row. This is her second professional publication.

DAMEON WILLICH was one of the principals in the artists' group Northern Lights, and is based near Seattle wherer his work regularly appears in convention art shows. His work has been seen several times in *FANTASY Magazine*. He particularly enjoys drawing horses and armor.

Interview with Elizabeth Moon

by Katy Huth Jones

[Since 1986, Elizabeth Moon has published six independent novels, two collaborations with Anne McCaffrey, and one short fiction collection, all from Baen Books, as well as twenty-four short stories.]

Have you always wanted to become a writer?

I didn't think of myself as becoming a writer; I just wrote all the time. I had a few spasms of thinking I would become a writer, and my very practical engineer mother would have me look up how much people got per word and how many words it would take a month to live on. When I was younger this was very daunting; I thought, "Gee, obviously I can't live on this because I couldn't possibly make enough." My mother's first requirement for anything I wanted to go into was, "Will it support you?" Very reasonable: she was a single parent bringing up a kid by herself. Practicality came first.

Did you take any writing courses?

I didn't take any writing courses in college. Much later I audited a class at Southwestern University as an adult student. It was very, very helpful. If that kind of class had been available earlier, I probably would have written a lot better and gotten published a lot sooner. The instructor's attitude was that people should write what they want to write, and her job was to help you write it better.

It was a real turning point for me because by then I had been messing around with writing for thirty years, and I knew I was not good enough to be published. I could not finish stories; I thought I had to write short stories and they had to stay short, but all my stories got long. The instructor said to me, "Write it how it has to be. Don't worry if it gets longer; write until it's finished and then work on it." I didn't know you could do that.

Is that how THE DEED OF PAKSENARRION came to be 600,000 words?

Yes, exactly. Paks was going to be a short story for a friend's son. It kind of took off. I think it may be the world's longest short story. The scary thing was it was even longer before I submitted it, particularly the first part. I decided, "Okay, even if it never gets published, I'm going to write as much as I want to." Friends who read it suggested some things that could be cut. Of course when an editor got a hold of it, there were other things that got cut, and very profitably, too. I learned a lot from the editing process. I think it's impossible for the beginner to know everything that needs to be there and needs to come out. You do things in inefficient ways when you're inexperienced. You don't know how to convey something concisely, so you say it four or five different ways, hoping one of them will work.

How long did it take you to write the trilogy?

It was broken up by our adoption of Michael, so there was a gap in there. The first part, **SHEEPFARMER'S DAUGHTER**, took eight months. At least I thought it was finished then. It had been through three complete drafts, but it had not had the later cuts that vastly improved it. I was planning the second two books while I wrote the first one, but between the time we found out we might be able to adopt Michael and his actual arrival, I didn't work on it steadily. I was getting ready for a baby in the house, so I would work a little, then not, then work a little. It was very different than the way I had written the first one all in one fell swoop, because in those days I was writing ten to twelve hours a day with no interruptions. It was wonderful!

I had this romantic idea that I would be the perfect adoptive mother, and I would have the perfect little child, and while I was breast-feeding him I would be typing away and he would be cuddled to my front in one of those little carriers. Well, somebody forgot to tell him that he was supposed to lie there happily while I wrote the story. He thought if Mommy was giving milk, that's all Mommy should be doing. He didn't like it! So that romantic notion disappeared real fast, and I went back to the standard mother's thing that any time the child is asleep, you write. Any time they're asleep—two o'clock in the morning, three o'clock in the afternoon, doesn't matter, just get in there and write until they wake up. In the meantime I got a computer, which really helped, speeded me up from the old typewriter—

You wrote all of SHEEPFARMER'S DAUGHTER on a typewriter?

On what I call a semi-electric typewriter. It wasn't even all

electric in terms of being able to push a button and having it return. It was very old, it had been my grandmother's. I had to have **SHEEPFARMER'S DAUGHTER** retyped professionally because that typewriter was so old and the typeface was so worn that even with a new ribbon the capital O's looked like a mosquito had been squashed in them. Then I got the computer, and I finished the second and third book in fourteen months. I was getting more efficient by then, too. Writing the first book taught me a lot. With each I became more efficient; I could say what I needed to say more efficiently. I told myself I had to finish the Paks books before Michael was up and walking. Have to, absolute deadline. Once he was on his feet and toddling around, obviously I was going to spend six months or a year doing nothing but chasing. So he beat me by about two weeks.

THE DEED OF PAKSENARRION wasn't your first published writing, was it?

When I finished **DIVIDED ALLEGIANCE** and **OATH OF GOLD** and the revision of **SHEEPFARMER'S DAUGHTER**, all of a sudden I wanted to write some short stories because I knew they were considered more marketable than books. I wrote short stories and started sending them off. That was when I was submitting to Marion Zimmer Bradley for the **SWORD & SORCERESS** anthologies. I had seen an ad in *Writer's Digest*. I thought, okay, I've got this fantasy world with these books already written; I'll do some incidents out of the world. She rejected five in a row, but with the fifth one said, "This one I really liked, but I've nearly filled the anthology. All I have room for is 1,500 words, humorous." By this time, of course, I'd gotten rejections from other places, too, but I looked at that and thought, "1,500 words. Hey, they can't shoot you for trying. What can I put in this world that would be little and funny?"

Earlier that spring I had gotten a concussion trying out a horse that I thought I might buy. This beautiful horse had some quirks that his owner who didn't ride didn't know about, and as a result I found it necessary to do an emergency bail-out at a gallop. Thanks to my own stupidity, I got my boot caught in the stirrup and got a good solid concussion. I didn't get dragged, I kicked free, but doing that in free flight after you vault off— Have you ever done a flying dismount?

No, I've only been on a horse about three times in my life.

To do a flying dismount, you put your hands on the front of the saddle. I was in an English saddle, which makes it easy. You kick your feet free and throw yourself off. If you do it right, you land facing forward, tucked and rolling and you don't get hurt. Most horses will duck aside from you when they feel you go off this way, so you're not even likely to get kicked if the horse is really running. It's the safest way to dismount at a fast speed. If you're on a horse that runs away and he's running toward something dangerous, it's much better to bail out than to allow yourself to be run into a train or onto a superhighway. In my case I was looking at a downhill slope of mesquite with a barbed wire fence at the bottom. I grew up in mesquite scrub, so I picked a clear spot about the size of this living room and was going to vault free. But it had been wet, so I was wearing rubber stable boots instead of proper riding boots, and the toe of the boot stuck in the stirrup. You look down after you've got your legs up to make sure you're free of the stirrups. Now these were English safety stirrups, so they wouldn't have dragged me anyway, they would have pulled off the saddle. Nonetheless I saw that the foot was caught and so I really kicked hard with this foot. Since I was in the air, this rotated me so that I landed on my rump, facing backward, and — poink — sandbagged myself.

Now if right before your fortieth birthday you had tried out this horse to prove that you're not too old to do these things, and then you wake up with your mother sitting beside you, saying, "Do you know who I am yet?" you feel like an idiot! Boy, do you feel like an idiot. But, from that concussion and the mesquite thorns in the leg, I got a story that Bradley bought, where I let the heroine not get knocked out, I let her do it right. I also sold an article to *Western Horseman* on how to handle head injuries if you're out riding. So it was a very profitable fall off the horse. I didn't, incidentally, buy the horse. Though it was a gorgeous horse, he needed a good solid sixty days of retraining. The woman had been leasing him to a fourteen-year-old girl. My mistake was in not remembering how I used to ride when I was that age. Fourteen-year-old girls tend, with some exceptions, to think that horses exist for speed and excitement.

Your expertise on horses shows in your books.

Well, sometimes I'm more expert than other times. I can still get bucked off, as witness Easter.

Is that how you broke your ribs?

Yes, my gentle horse, Jezz, bucked me off. Macho, the ungentle horse, leaned over the fence and laughed at me.

Did you enter the Marines right after college?

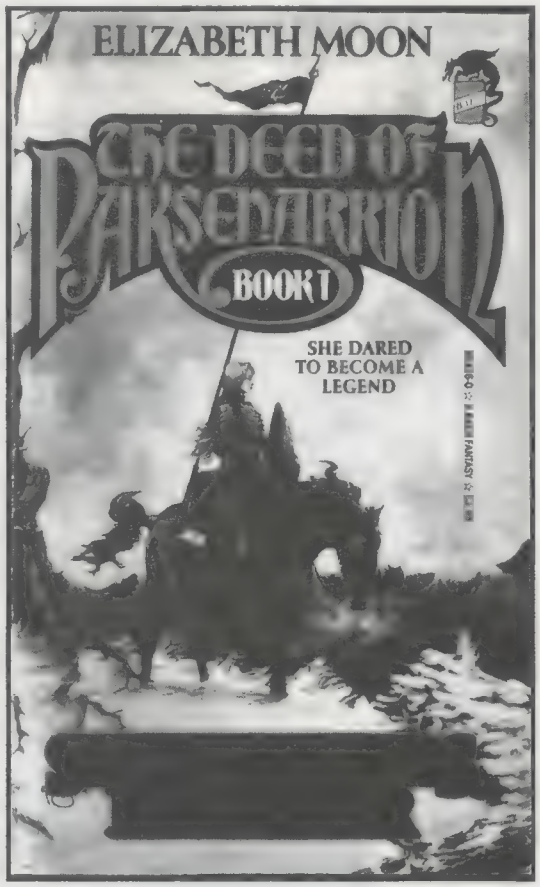
After my first degree. I was in for three years, 1968-1971.

Do you feel that's been a major influence on your writing?

It's been a major influence in my life. It's enabled me to do things as a writer that would have been very difficult otherwise. It's difficult, if not impossible, to have insight into military matters, not just technical military matters, which of course you can research, but the feel of the military: the difference between the interaction of a sergeant with a corporal and a captain with a first lieutenant. It also helps that my husband was in the Army, so that I have through him some insight into a different branch of the service.

Judith Tarr writes that your books have a heavy Tolkien influence. Do you agree?

Yes and no. What she meant, as she explained to me, was that Tolkien had built a fantasy world literally from the ground up, and it all fits together. She felt that I had done the same thing. Certainly nobody writing after Tolkien's books came out in this country can claim to be uninfluenced one way or another. His influence on me, primarily, was that I quit writing fantasy for twenty years. I looked at the stuff I'd written in high school and earlier in college and said, "This is childish, this isn't good. I'll wait until I can do it right." So in the sense of giving me a model of the kind of depth and intricacy and complexity which should go into imagined worlds, absolutely I was influenced by Tolkien.



In the sense of working directly from his ideals, his being influenced by the Nordic sagas, not so much. That didn't attract me as much. I've read a lot of Tolkien, including some of his essays. I think we had the same approach to world building, but we came at it with different likes and dislikes. I'm not really British and I'm not really Nordic in any way, and so I don't have the attitudes toward some of the elements in his fantasy that he had. For instance, I have a completely different attitude about the relationship of the sexes. I've been influenced by method, but I could not begin to do the language stuff that he did. He had that background in languages. He could make up the languages, write the poetry in the other languages. I don't have that ability. I think I'm much stronger in geology than he was. I remember looking at one of the maps for the first time, thinking, "Here's someone who doesn't understand mountain ranges." It didn't bother me when I was reading it, but I remember seeing the map and thinking, "It can't work like that." It can, of course, if you build your fantasy world that way, but I like real geology, so I made real geology for my books and had fun.

Do you prefer writing fantasy over science fiction?

I have no real preference for either. I like doing both. For a long time it seemed that the short stuff came out science fiction and the long stuff came out fantasy, but I've written a lot of fantasy short stories which didn't get published. They come out of different places in my head, but I like doing both.

Some think that science fiction comes from real science and that fantasy is all imagination. How much research did you actually do for the Paks trilogy?

A lot of research. I happen to like fantasy that feels real while being different. I wanted to write the book I have always wanted to read, so that meant I had to do the research I would have wanted someone else to do. The research for Paks, just my notes alone, filled a couple of fat notebooks. I read a lot of history; some of it was rereading history, because my first degree was in history. The particular period I was using as a partial model was 13th century Northern Italy, where there were roving bands of mercenaries taking a city, ruling for a while, being booted out by another one. I had a book called **THE MILITARY HISTORY OF VENICE**. Venice hired mercenary companies in exactly the same way that the trading cities of Aarenis hired mercenary companies. I researched the size of the company, how far it could go, what it would cost for a contract, some things that don't even show up in the book, but I had to work out the economics for this. How are these cities going to raise the money to hire the armies to fight the wars, and what were the wars going to be about? Not that Paks as a private in the company would ever understand any of this, but I had to know it so it would make sense to me.

I also used Sherman's memoirs from the Civil War because they were the best English language description on how to move large numbers of people and supplies. Sherman had a thing about supplies: How much does it take to feed four hundred people on the march? How far can they march? How long does it take them to eat when you stop to feed them? How much does it take to feed them? How much do you lose to vermin? If you carry sacks of flour they get weevils in them, and birds come down and peck them open. I used that. There were actually handier sources in ancient texts that were closer to how my people marched, but they didn't use the same measures of distance, and I was finding it very, very difficult to remind myself how far a stadia was, or how far these other measures of distance were. I could read Sherman's pounds of flour and miles of distance, and I could figure it out for myself and only do one translation to get it right for the book.

Sierra Club has a good book on wilderness travel concerning how much pack animals carry and how much pack animals carrying a certain load over certain grades have to be fed. I also got a book on horse packing in general so I could be sure that when the Duke hires mules, they're carrying the right amount of weight and it's the correct number of mules for that size company. So there's a lot of research in Paks.

In my science fiction stories I also do extensive research. I like to think that the science is a legitimate extrapolation from current research in the fields where I know something about current research, unless it's intended to just be funny. "The Generic Rejuvenation of Milo Ardry", where the guy sprouts feathers, is funny. That is not good science, but it's funny. Something like "Gut Feelings", the use of bioengineered parasites to graze off colon cancer cells, that's a possibility. It's an ecological solution to a medical problem rather than what they're actually doing now—genetic research to see if they can inhibit the production of the cancer cells in the first place, also a very good approach, and probably cheaper.

So where did Paks come from?

Years before, when she first came into my head, I tried to make her a science fiction character, because I wasn't writing fantasy at the time, and she died on the vine. I tried to make her an adventure story character, and again she died on the vine. I was not at that time listening to her and saying, "Who do you

want to be and where do you really live?" As soon as I did that, she began to shape the space around her.

Is her name connected in any way to the word Pax?

That was her work name before I knew what her real name was. I had in mind writing about a warrior who was peaceful at heart, who was not vicious and cruel all the way inside. So I was calling her Pax at first, for peace. The friend to whom I showed this when I was first starting out thought it was really strange. A peaceful warrior, you've got to be kidding. But that's how she felt to me. In fact, the short story that started Paks never got finished, and isn't even in the book, because in it she goes to a tavern at one point and somebody says, "What's your name?" and she says, "Paksenarrion Dorthansdotter." I didn't know she was going to do that! I didn't know how to spell it! Then, in talking to her the way you do with characters, I said, "What does that mean?" and she very proudly told me her grandmother's version of what her name meant. Very proudly.

Well, there went Pax as peace down the drain. But she still had that same feel about her. At that point I realized I wanted to spell her name with a "K" because it just burst into my head: Aha, this is going to make a good confusion later on. What if she's got the derivation of her name wrong? I don't know if the peace part of it forced itself into her other name, because names come to me with characters. I think it's just a fortuitous overlap. But yes, Pax started out as her yard name, or stable name, or pet name, because she was not essentially violent or cruel. Well, maybe essentially violent but not essentially cruel.

Now that Michael is older and you're teaching him at home, how do you juggle your writing with homeschooling?

With great difficulty. I basically don't get to write in the morning, which is my best time for writing. I can write a little bit in the afternoon. I do most of it in the evening and anytime my husband takes Michael somewhere. It's kind of going back to the old thing, when they sleep, you write. I have become, of necessity, a much more efficient writer. When I started out I thought I had to have hours at a stretch to write. Fortunately, I think I had them with the first book. It gave me the sense of flow, the ability to feel how the story was flowing over a day's work. I don't have that now, but I can still feel the pull; the story will pull me from work period to work period, even if I have to quit after thirty minutes, which happens sometimes. Now toward the end of a book, Michael has learned that if I'm finishing one up, things get real tight. I'll put on the oven timer and say, "I have to finish this chapter— when the buzzer goes and not before, unless blood is flowing on the ground."

I was very heartened by meeting Anne McCaffrey a few years ago. I met her adult children, and I asked her daughter what it had been like having a writing mother, because I was concerned about Michael. How much did it bother her? Did her mother say, "Go away, I have to finish this book by the deadline?" She said by the time she was eight years old that sometimes it was pesky, but she learned to sense how desperate the deadline was, and she never felt neglected or pushed aside. In fact, she felt more competent that she could deal with little things herself. She did not feel it had been a bad experience for her at all. She said, "I always knew mother wanted me, I always knew mother cared. I also knew that deadlines were absolute and had to do with the bread and butter. You just did it." I think Michael is learning that, and I don't really think it hurts.

I do miss having the blocks of time, particularly in polishing books. You want to read and work on a long enough section that it all has the same flow and the same level of polish, and if you're having to polish in short chunks, you can make one chapter real shiny and the next one still has these rough spots. You look at it later when they send it back to you and say, "Oh my, what happened?"

*In your short story collection, **LUNAR ACTIVITY**, the intros to each story talk about the influence of living in a small town: "Science fiction is the logical result of letting a Moon loose in a small town." Could you elaborate?*

It's been very valuable for me. Small towns don't work for all writers, because writers are very different. Some people need the kind of stimulation a city provides. I don't seem to. I seem to function very happily with the more intense relationships that are possible in a small town. You really get to knew a fewer number of people better. It has disadvantages—research is more difficult. I can't go to the symphony. There's things like that I can't do. I can't say that rural people are more real than city people. City people are every bit as real, but perhaps because the town is smaller, because there's less distraction between people, it's very easy to see the mechanisms of interaction. The people are not as sophisticated, so their reactions to things are more direct, which is very valuable for a writer just to observe. The language patterns of the older people were derived from oral storytelling, oral interpersonal communication, and all their speech rhythms, their use of metaphor, are very, very natural and basic. Particularly for someone who wants to do fantasy, having a direct connection to that kind of language is very important.

Do you find it easy to go back and forth from a female to a male protagonist?

A few years ago I would have said, "Yes, absolutely." Now I'm wondering how good a job I do on male protagonists. I'm not really sure. Certainly in a short story it doesn't seem to give

me any trouble to go back and forth. I had real problems with the Gird book, **SURRENDER NONE**, because Gird had to be a rural male who in his youth was the kind I don't particularly like. I picked some of these people off the roads when I was a paramedic, when they'd gone out and crunched themselves, and he would have been that kind. I found it very difficult to live with him in my head for the length of time it took me to do the book. However, I think I did him well as a male protagonist. It certainly is a shift. It was more of a shift for Luap in **LIAR'S OATH**, but then Luap was not a person I particularly admired anyway. Gird was going to grow out of being a young lout; Luap never grew out of being a self-indulgent so-and-so.

*Did you or did you not coauthor **GENERATION WARRIORS**? The cover says "by Anne McCaffrey and Elizabeth Moon", but the title page says "by Anne McCaffrey and Jody Lynn Nye".*

I wrote it! That was a mistake. That was a 225,000-copy mistake, for which adequate apologies were made. It was a mistake made by an editor who isn't there anymore and by not checking over the stuff that came back from the typesetter. They didn't know until they unpacked the box of books in the office and looked at it and said, "Oh, dear." I got a call saying, "Um, there's a little mistake."

The only way it's really hurt is that because booksellers categorize books by the title page and not by the cover or the header line, they often don't carry that one; they don't put it with my books and if I'm there for a signing, they won't have it. It's now become sort of a funny story. A lot of people know about it. It was a mistake, but when you've got 225,000 copies with the wrong title page, you can't just trash them and go through it again. They were very apologetic and very nice to me.

Did Baen suggest the collaborations with Anne McCaffrey? Was it to help you publicize Paks?

Both that and because Anne McCaffrey was looking for junior authors to work with to extend her working ability; she needed to get some books out herself and she didn't have time enough to do them all, so we were recruited. There were originally three authors, and one of them dropped out fairly early. I was offered **GENERATION WARRIORS**, which would have been her book, basically because I was familiar with the world — it followed after **SASSINAK** — and Jody Lynn Nye had three other books to do right away.

What are your present/future projects?

Right now I'm working on the book that will be the sequel to my latest book, **HUNTING PARTY**, which is science fiction. Actually, it's space opera crossed with a fox-hunting story crossed with island adventure crossed with English country house mystery. I decided to see if I could do all my favorite things in one book: spaceships and horses and crawling around in caves. It was fun. The heroines are not young, like Paks; one is in her forties and the other in her eighties. After all, why should the young have all the adventures and all the fun?

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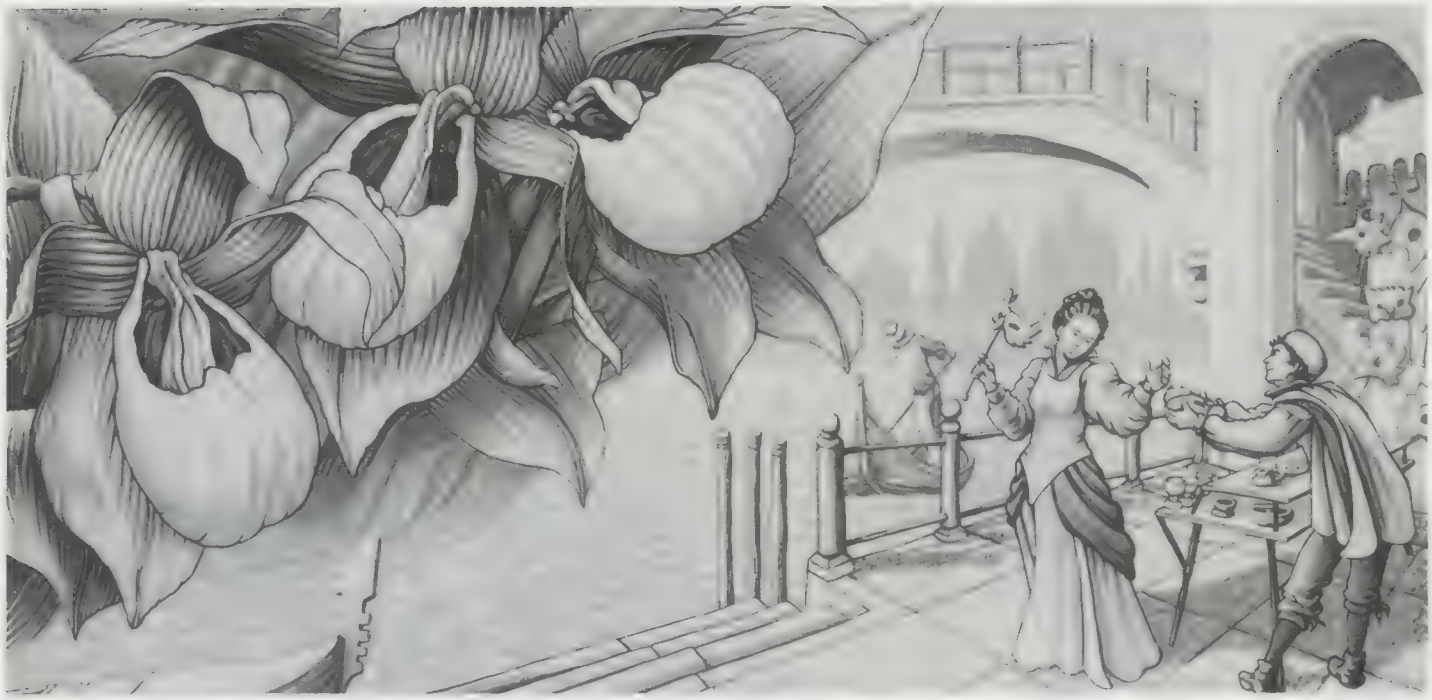


Art by Barb Armata

Ladyslipper

by Lawrence Schimel

If you've the luck about you as you wander through the woods, you might come across a Ladyslipper. She's a shy blossom, and blushes pink when found. For the Ladyslipper has a secret. All wildflowers have stories, but to hear them you must know how to listen. You must sit quietly nearby, but not so close that you overshadow their petals, blocking out the sun.

And you must whisper a secret. You cannot expect to get a story, if you will not give one in return. A story is worth more than money, than silver or gold. A secret, a dream, the desires of your heart; these are the currency of wildflowers.

When you have forgotten that you wanted something from the orchid, lost in the heady sensation of sharing a story, the soft and gentle breeze will carry her voice to you. Do not listen for words; she speaks in color. Close your eyes and let the images fill your ears with sound.

The story begins familiarly: the stepmother, stepsisters; the girl who tends the hearth; the Faery Godmother and the glass slippers she buys ...

You did not think she made them out of nothing? Magic takes substance to work from. She was a practical Faery Godmother; she knew that things of this world, stayed in this world, after the clock struck twelve. She went to Venice and bought a pair.

Venice is full of Faery Godmothers. Travel is simpler for them, since the borders of Faerie touch all parts of the world at once. She had only to think of her destination before she stepped across the border, and when her foot touched ground she was there. Venice is a magical place whose roads are made of water. It is a land of bridges and archways and taxicab boats.

Venice was the natural place to outfit a young girl for a Masquerade. Venice is famous for its masks, produced yearround in anticipation of Carnival. Every type of mask is made there: suns and moons, and butterflies, long-nosed jesters and short-nosed jesters, square masks, round masks, masks with feathers, silver masks, gold masks. Any type of mask the mind can imagine.

The Faery Godmother chose Cinderella a small pink bird mask.

Venice is also famous for its glasswork: goblets and vases, delicate figures spun of colored glass threads. As the Faery Godmother flew over the marketplace looking for the proper outfit to suit her charge, a pair of glass slippers caught her eye. They were lightly veined with pink. She flew down and bought them in a snap.

"Perfect!" she exclaimed as the glassblower wrapped them in tissue. "They're perfect."

And they were. Cinderella wore them to the ball, and danced all evening with the prince.

But all evenings must come to an end, and soon the clock struck twelve. Cinderella slipped away, out the back, through the gardens. One of her slippers caught in the roots of a tree. In her hurry to get away before the magic faded, Cinderella left the beautiful slipper behind.

Because the slipper had traveled through Faerie and been infused with magic, it began to transform. The heel took root and began to grow, lifting the body of the slipper into the air. The toe of the slipper split, and the sides peeled away into petals. And a new orchid was born.

As for the prince and Cinderella, that's as far into the story as the Ladyslipper knows. So when next a Ladyslipper tells you her secret, you can tell her the rest of the story.

❀

Lawrence Schimel has stories published in quite a variety of anthologies as well as previous issues of this magazine.

Barb Armata is active in several areas of art, doing commercial signs and ads, comics, illustration, and paintings. Her work can be seen at Northeast sf art shows such as Boskone.

Art by Lynne Taylor Fahnestalk

The Hammock

Candy Taylor Tutt

The rest of the apartment didn't matter once Lynne saw the back porch. Sunny, spacious, it was completely enclosed, with built-in shelves beneath the windows, tall cupboards and even a sink. At the far end sat a metal-frame hammock, stored for winter. Her deposit accepted, she began moving in paintings and easels right away. The following Saturday, with her other belongings dumped about in haphazard fashion, she happily rearranged assorted pads of art paper, canvases, and watercolors in the cheery porch until dark.

Exhausted at last, she saw with dismay that bags, boxes and piles of clothes covered the apartment's ancient couch. Then she remembered the hammock. Lynne rummaged through boxes until she found a set of sheets and a blanket. Feeling like a kid at camp, she made up a bed on the hammock and climbed on.

She ran across a field of wildflowers, laughing, stopping to pick poppies and watch sparrows as they snatched up twigs to make a nest …

Lynne drifted awake and lay retracing the dream, wanting to enjoy it one more time before getting up. She spent the day fitting all her art paraphernalia into the sun room, and while she did manage to create a path through the boxes from the tiny front room to the bathroom, by the end of the day the couch was still buried. It didn't matter; Lynne realized she was looking forward to sleeping on the hammock again.

Monday morning, as she straightened the sheets on the taut green canvas, Lynne recalled the dream: It was the same. The field, the flowers, the nesting birds, the same dream, two nights in a row. Her hand on the smooth linen, she stared down at the sheets.

Poppies, wildflowers, all there on the design that lay across the hammock. She looked for birds in the pattern; they must be her own contribution. Lynne began to brush her hair and winced as the bristles caught on a snarl.

A tiny white feather sifted down, resting on the Pullman sink.

That night Lynne carefully folded the wildflower sheets, put them on a narrow shelf in the bathroom, and picked another set from the box. Green and brown lengths of kelp and seaweed stretched lazily across sand-colored percale, dotted with pink- and white-striped sea

shells.

In the morning Lynne hugged herself, still warm under the covers, and smiled. She could still hear the swish on waves on fine sand and the "kew-kew" of seagulls above her. The following day she awoke with the antics of a hermit crab still clear in her mind. As she rolled over and yawned, something poked at her toe. She tunneled down between warm sheets and brought out a tiny brown-speckled sea shell. For a long time she sat on the hammock, swaying gently, holding the shell in her hand. She put it in a pencil box on a nearby shelf, along with the white feather, then neatly made her bed.

On Friday afternoon Lynne was tired, muscles still stressed from emptying boxes every night, but euphoric. In the morning she had an appointment with the director of an art gallery, and she had a marvelous idea for a painting. She could hardly wait to get home.

Waiting by her front door, atop a pyramid of floral soft-sided luggage, sat her cousin Theah.

Lynne came to a standstill on the walk, her enthusiasm draining from her.

Her mother and Theah's were sisters, both artists. At one time, just after Lynne's father died, they lived briefly with Theah's family. They were all talented, musical or artistic; everyone had shared, laughed, created, enjoyed one another's company. Everyone had been kind and supportive. Everyone—except Theah. Lynne's jumbled memories were of hot summer nights, secret threats from her cousin, being pinched hard enough to make her cry but not enough to leave a bruise.

"Theah," was all Lynne could muster.

Her cousin mashed out a cigarette on the sole of her spike-heeled shoe and tossed the butt into the flower bed.

"I had a hell of a time finding this place," she said accusingly.

"Well, I've only been here a week," Lynne replied in defense.

"Yeah, that's what the landlady said at your old address. Well, I just got into town myself." Theah made her annoying snort-laugh. "You can put me up for a few days while I audition for a part in a play." It was a statement, not a request.

Numb, Lynne unlocked her door.

"Where can I put my things?" Theah pushed past her, jostling with her suitcases.

"Anywhere you can find room."

That night Lynne went to bed not for sleep but for sanctuary, along the beach in her dreams. Saturday morning she took a warm, comforting shower before she ventured into the front room.

"Did you sleep all right?" she asked politely.

"It's beastly in here! The couch is lumpy. What did they stuff it with, a dead camel? And cold! I don't know how you stand it. But then, you have a Spartan streak, don't you?" Theah leaned back onto the couch. "Do you have any coffee?"

"No, but ..."

"That's right, you don't drink it ... well then, I'll have to get some." Theah arose and headed for the bathroom. "I suppose you've used up all the hot water, you always were a thoughtless little thing ..." Another snorting laugh echoed.

"I have an appointment with an art gallery this morning." Lynne raised her voice at the door while she dressed quickly. "I'll be back sometime around noon."

"My little cousin the painter. Well, ta-ta," Theah responded, sarcastic, then added quickly, "Leave me a couple of dollars, will you?"

Lynne stared at the bathroom door, then carefully took out two one-dollar bills, laid them on the coffee table, and left. She returned, mid-day, to a haze of cigarette smoke in the front room, the radio tuned to an abrasive talk show, and Theah lounging on the couch in a green satin robe.

"I managed to fit most of my things into that messy little room out back," Theah reported smugly. "God, what a mare's nest."

"Uh-huh," Lynne said absently on her way through the kitchen. As she opened the door, a hot gush of anger mixed with panic spread through her. One of Theah's suitcases had punched a hole in the corner of a large watercolor as it leaned against a shelf. Lynne knelt and ran her finger over the ragged tear. She could spray-glue a sheet behind the ripped place, put it in a smaller frame by cropping the damaged area ... She smoothed the paper again, then got to her feet resolutely and moved all her paintings behind the hammock, out of harm's way ... and Theah's.

Perspiring and tired, Lynne stopped to rest, sitting on a small wooden stepstool. So much, she reflected, for beginning a new painting. Instead she went to the refrigerator for some lemonade.

"Ah, good idea. A drink." Theah materialized in the kitchen doorway, robe askew. "What do you have?"

"Lemonade," Lynne answered flatly. "And mineral water."

"My, how daring." Theah returned to the couch, a biting wave of cigarette smoke behind her.

Lynne counted the hours, at last excused herself and climbed between her shell-strewn sheets for solitude. Sunday morning she woke to an acrid smell, puzzled ...

Of course. Theah had made coffee.

Lynne disliked coffee, especially the way Theah made it, a black ooze exuding a bitter, skunklike aroma. Padding barefoot into the tiny kitchen, she cringed as sugar and dry coffee grounds scrunched on the linoleum. She frowned and got into the shower. Wrapped in the flannel sheet she used as a bath towel, Lynne slid her sandals on before going through the kitchen. Theah looked up from a cup of black brew.

"Got any plans today?" Before Lynne could answer, Theah continued, "Don't worry about me, I'm capable of amusing myself. By the way, I could use some more money for tomorrow, if you can spare another munificent contribution." Ashes from her cigarette fell onto the couch; with a grunt, Theah rubbed them into the worn cushion.

Lynne couldn't recall being so glad to see Monday arrive.

She got home to an empty apartment and was savoring the silence when Theah burst in, smartly clad in an oxblood corduroy jacket and slacks.

"How can you exist like this! You don't even have a phone, for God's sake. I had to walk four blocks just to make a call, and then it damn near took an act of Congress to get a taxi ..." Theah threw her jacket onto a chair. "But as usual, I managed to triumph over adversity," she continued, ever theatrical. "I got an audition for a part in a play!"

"Oh, Theah, where?" Lynne asked, her curiosity genuine.

"Right here! Can you imagine, Francis Coy is directing a drama festival right here in your little backwater town. Aren't you excited?" Without a break, Theah went on, lighting a cigarette. "But then, you probably didn't even know about it, you live like a monk. Honestly, sometimes I wonder about you, my little cousin." Theah's hand darted out and patted Lynne's cheek, quick, hard.

Her face stung. Suddenly tired and depressed, Lynne said softly, "I'm going to bed."

"This early?" Theah laugh-snorted. "But then, living here, what else does one do after dark, especially if they're alone

... you *are* alone in there, aren't you?"

Theah's vicious laughter was at last erased by the gentle sway of the hammock.

Lynne worked overtime all week, and found that by going to bed right after dinner she could avoid Theah almost entirely. By Thursday her boss told her to take Friday off; not only was she caught up, she was well into next week's work. Her high spirits lasted all the way to her front door.

Theah sat on the couch in a white kimono splashed with gaudy red hibiscus, drinking a glass of wine. Her tousled hair was slicked back and secured with one of Lynne's carved wooden hair combs.

"I'm celebrating, cousin dear. Want some wine ... no, of course not, you don't drink ... well, I'll just have to drink yours for you." She giggled.

Lynne went to the refrigerator and took out a cold bottle of mineral water. "What are you and you drinking to?" she asked, twisting the cap off.

"I..." Theah gestured grandly, bumping the ceramic lamp on the end table, "... oops ... have a part in Francis Coy's production of *The Long Hot Summer*."

"Oh, Theah, that is good news." Lynne's smile was sincere. She took a long drink of mineral water. "It should be easy for you to find a place to stay."

Theah laugh-snorted. "Don't be silly," she said, refilling her glass from the half-empty bottle. "I already have a place to stay."

Lynne lay face down on top of the covers for a long time, her eyes burning. A long hot summer, indeed. As she quietly folded back the sheets, she felt a sea breeze sweep up to caress her face. She lay down and, as a wavelike calm washed over her again and again, fell asleep.

Friday she was up early. Passing through the front room, she paused, then briskly snapped the drapes open. Theah groaned from the folds of blankets on the couch.

"... head ... aspirin ..."

"Theah, I have today off," Lynne announced. "I'm going shopping."

"So, you're normal after all," Theah commented dourly. "Clothes?"

"No ..." Lynne pulled on a fleece jacket. "Not for clothes ..." The screen door banged shut behind her as Theah, mumbling, slid back under the covers.

It took Lynne all day. At last, at a factory outlet store in the industrial area of town, she found just what she was looking for. Home at last, she noticed the couch vacant and heard the sound of the shower. She took the package into her back room and opened it hastily. Tawny colors and shapes leaped and pranced before her, then lay still, waiting. The shower stopped.

"Theah?" Lynne called out.

Theah slouched into the doorway, her green robe water-spotted, hair held back with Lynne's wooden comb.

"In honor of your getting the part." Lynne patted the hammock. "It's much more comfortable than the couch. My treat."

"My, my," Theah purred as she stroked the new sheets covering the hammock. "You just may have some good taste after all."

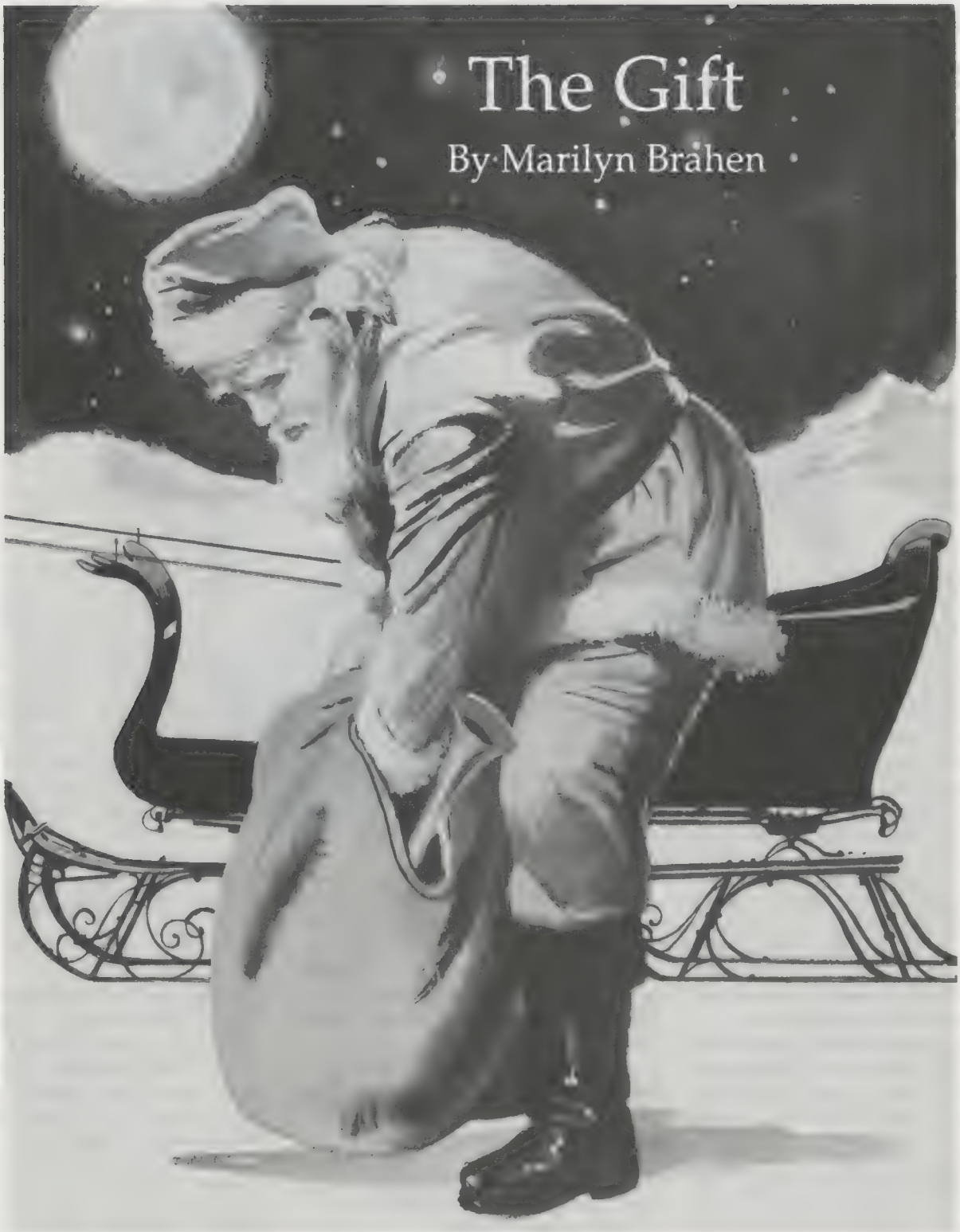
At random across buff percale, stands of bleached savannah grasses parted to reveal the faces of female lions as they stalked their prey. Close by, under low branches, the long shaggy manes of the males hung in dark contrast to their unblinking tan eyes.

"Good night, Theah."

Art by Lynne Taylor Fahnestalk

Candy Taylor Tutt got into writing through a love of dragons, but the dragon novel still awaits completion, having been pushed aside by short stories such as this one.

Lynne Taylor Fahnestalk, despite the middle name, is no relation to the author, as far as we know. She lives in Edmonton, Alberta.



I have been an unofficial elf most of my life, helping people quietly whenever they came across my path. I also hope to help others ... somehow ... through my writing, but on that early evening one December, my

Artwork by Vincent Di Fate

elven gifts were the ones apparently being called on.

Initially I had no more intention to intervene than anyone else on the train platform. He stood near the exit steps of the elevated train in the Frankford section of Northeast Philadelphia. He had the prerequisite ruddy jowls, cascading white curly hair reaching to his shoulders and covering his lower face and chest in a sumptuous beard. His Santa suit looked authentic, and I smiled as he got off the El two cars down from mine with other rush hour travelers.

I headed for the exit still smiling when the jolly old geezer approached one passenger then another as they hurried past, avoiding him as he called out: "Excuse me? Could you help me?"

Flurries of booted feet, hunched overcoats and tightly clutched handbags. He delayed a man in a long grey woolen coat.

"Excuse me, sir? Won't you please help me?"

The man laughed, heading down exit steps, throwing "Go home, Pops. You're drunk!" over his shoulder.

The old fellow stood on the platform, perplexed and appearing indignant at the man's remark. People jostled by him. He held up his arms in a plea. "Please. I'm trying to get home. Won't somebody help me?"

I watched the faces of the other travelers. Some were averted, some smiled, others grinned wildly. But they all drifted down the stairs.

I found I couldn't desert him. It may be a blessing or it may be stupidity, but I believe in magic. In magic in a material world.

I couldn't rid myself of the impish thought that this *was* Santa Claus. Saint Nicholas. Kris Kringle. That oversized employer of elves and reindeer. Ho, Ho, Ho!

My elfish bent asserted itself. Reason flew off into the cold December sky.

"I'll help you," I called.

He turned his head and looked at me as if he recognized me, then walked over with a polite stately nod. "I thank you, young lady."

"You're welcome. What's the problem?"

"The problem, yes." He resumed nodding in the droll manner of one who's caused his own precarious situation. "Well, I seem to have been given some very wrong directions." He held up one white-gloved hand, first finger extended. "That's the first problem."

"Well, we can try to get you directions to wherever you're heading. But what else is wrong?"

A blush heightened his already rouge-tinged cheeks and forehead. "I'm afraid I'm temporarily embarrassed."

"Huh?"

"I've been robbed."

"That's terrible," I commiserated cautiously. "Did you tell a policeman?"

"Well, I'm afraid I hadn't realized it until ..." He collected his thoughts. "You see, I was visiting Philadelphia, and having conducted my business here sought out a cab to drive me to the airport. But none of your cabs would stop." He shook his head. "Must be the suit. Doesn't inspire folk the way it used to, at least not before Christmas on a busy city street.

"I asked a passing gentleman how I might get to the airport and he directed me to your airport shuttle, an underground train that travels there. He instructed me to go to the subway at 15th and Market Streets and so I did.

"Once there, I asked a teller where I might board the train that ran to the airport. She asked me the direction I was heading for and I told her north."

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"North ... Well, you headed in the right direction. You mean Northeast Airport, right?"

"No, no. When I said north, I meant my flight destination. Which she apparently misunderstood. She pointed past the turnstile, telling me to take the stairs marked Frankford. I had misgivings about her advice but my attempt to voice them was met by a look of utter dismissal. The crowd behind me had become quite restless and so I clutched my knapsack and descended those stairs.

"The train came and the boarders swelled about, entering and exiting it. Not the nicest sort of train, doors snapping open and shut nastily. As I entered, I felt a bump and jostle at my side, and my knapsack was gone, no longer in my hand. The train doors had shut and, studying the floor and the surrounding area, I knew I had not dropped it in the rush. And as the train whistled through to the next stop, an elderly woman seated near me told me she had seen a young man rob me of it as he left the train."

I didn't respond immediately.

"I do apologize for keeping you here so long. But I am quite lost and this doesn't resemble an airport." He sighed. Santa Claus sighed.

"Well, where is your home?"

"The North Pole," he said with an absolutely straight face.

"The North Pole," I repeated with a smile that was more than slightly out of kilter.

"Yes, I go by way of Seattle, Washington with a stopover in Chicago. Or would if my return flight ticket hadn't been absconded off with ... along with my other belongings."

He seemed both genuinely depressed and sincere, but just the same ...

I grasped at the opener he'd given me. "What airline were you taking?"

"Northwest."

"That takes you to the North Pole, huh?"

"Yes, my dear young lady." He inclined his head in a nod; his eyes twinkled to match the affable smile he wore. "It travels to Alaska and then I have private transportation to carry me to destination's end."

"Well," I murmured, wariness showing, "I'm certain your flight's out of International Airport, well past Southwest Philadelphia in the opposite direction." We stood there, him without a spare nickel, me without a lot of spare cash to help him and wondering if I had any spare brains left in my head. "Perhaps we should find a policeman."

Santa shook his head. "He'd tell me to go down to the station house to report the crime. I don't think it would help."

"But they might drive you to the airport."

"Not likely. I'd say they have other things to do than provide transportation for lost travelers."

"Or direct you to a Traveler's Aid office."

"Now that's a possibility. I'm sure there's one at the airport. But I'd rather not report the crime." He saw my hesitancy. "It'd be bad publicity. What would the children think?"

An El train had pulled in, emptied, and was sitting, waiting for its return ride back to Center City. I fished in my shoulder-strap handbag and pulled ten dollars from my wallet. A sap is a sap. But, Lord, he *looked* like Santa Claus. "Here. Take this and take the train back to 15th Street. Don't bother with the Airport Shuttle. I don't know its schedule and I'm sure you want to get to the airport and the Traveler's Aid office as soon as possible. Go to The Bellevue at Broad and Walnut. I think they have an airport limousine and a nice lobby you can wait in until the limo's available."

"Are you sure they'll let anyone board it? Not just hotel guests?"

I wasn't sure. "I don't know. But I can't see why not."

He looked down at his red Christmas suit. A news headline flashed across my mind: VAGRANT SANTA ARRESTED AT THE BELLEVUE.

"You're right," I said, wincing. "The desk clerk might not believe your story."

"I know I'm imposing," he said, his voice gentle, "but you're the only one who's offered to help me. Do you think you might take me to the airport? I'll reimburse you for any costs as soon as I get home. You have my word on it!"

"I ... umm ... don't even know your name."

He hesitated slightly, then asked: "Do you want to know the truth, young lady?"

"Of course!"

"My name, then, is S. Claus. I am also known as Kris Kringle and as Jolly Old St. Nick, although that is largely due to a brother of mine who carries on the tradition in the Netherlands. The S. stands for Santa."

"It can't be," I mumbled, vowing silently to end all philanthropic ventures in my life from that moment on.

"You asked for the truth. Many things we think can't be, well, in fact, are. Look at me," he commanded. "Go on! Look at me closely ... with your heart."

I studied his face, his eyes twinkling again. I saw stars in a night sky above new fallen snow on a Christmas Eve. I smelled sweet plum pudding and fresh evergreen boughs. I saw children, now young, now old, of many eras gone and here and yet to come dancing in his eyes. I saw their innocence and faith, as they drifted into sleep, their belief in this totally giving person. "Dear God! You're really him!"

He threw his head back at my look of astonishment to laugh heartily enough to satisfy the strictest traditionalist. "Yes, I'm Santa Claus. Oh," he laughed again, "does me good to laugh! Does me good to know someone has a little faith!"

I started to deny it, to run back to the sanctity of sanity.

"You're not going to lose it now, are you, Carol?" he admonished with a smile.

"How did you know my name?"

"I didn't until we connected ... until you believed. After belief, it's a simple matter. I look into *your* heart."

"But ..."

"Would you escort me to the airport? I would be so grateful. And I'll answer any questions you have while we journey back to 15th Street."

How a mythological figure could spring to life as I came home from work during the Christmas season was a mystery to me. But a writer's mind is always open, willing to test the water if a mystery might be solved, or at least have light shed upon it. I pulled a small writing pad and pen out of my handbag. "All right, Santa. There've been a few things I always wanted to ask you. It's getting cold and this train's leaving soon. Let's get on."

As we seated ourselves, the doors of the train. It chugalugged back to Center City.

"I have a lot of questions," I began.

"Fine. But must we use that pen and paper? Couldn't you keep it up here?" He tapped his forehead. "It's so formal, I'd be watching my every word!"

"It's just for notes. Memory joggers."

He stayed silent.

I put away the pen and paper, grinning.

"Thank you. First question?"

"First question. If you're Santa Claus, how come people buy gifts?"

"Now, Carol." A patient smile developed on his lips.

"What's my last name?" I asked abruptly.

"Excuse me?" he blinked.

"My last name. You knew my first. What's my last name?"

He studied me for a minute. "Matthews. Carol Ann Matthews. And you always wanted a piano. Not from me; from your parents. You were too old to believe in me ... at least that's what they told you."

My mouth hung open. "I still haven't gotten one."

He shrugged and gestured with his hands expansively. "I'm afraid you're on your own for this year, dear. My work quota's finished."

"Oh."

"Maybe next year." He smiled again. His eyes were placid pools. "I'll see what I can do."

The child in me, long buried, believed him. "Oh, well. If you could ..."

"I'll give it my best effort. Now, you had questions?"

"Yes. I'll come back to that other one later. First off, what are you doing here in your Santa Claus suit when it's not Christmas Eve? Why didn't you take your sleigh and reindeer? Aren't you supposed to be a master of invisibility and all that?"

He held up his hand to stop the torrent. "First off, as you put it, I had the bad sense to schedule a business trip on the day Mrs. Claus does her laundry. When I looked for my good travel suit, I found it was at the cleaners and wouldn't be done until Tuesday. My other business suit had a rip in the seam ... too many cookies, I'm afraid. Mrs. Claus hadn't had a chance to repair it, what with supervising the elves and feeding their little faces." He saw my incredulous look. "Yes, Carol. There *are* elves."

"Elves?" I held my jaw tightly. It threatened to expand.

"Little people with slightly pointed ears, if you prefer," he conciliated.

"Midgets?"

"Good Lord, no! They're not human. At least not Homo Sapiens. They're another species and not entirely visible by choice which accounts for your and society's amazement."

"Okay," I conceded. "So there really are elves ... somewhere. Go back to your story. Your suit was at the cleaners ..."

"Yes, my suit was at the cleaners and I had a trip scheduled to Philadelphia to buy a very rare book. A very special person had need of a volume of stories published in 1890. Out of print now. I had to get an original: it only had one printing."

"A kid wanted an old book for Christmas?"

"It wasn't for a child. It was for an adult."

"An adult. And you were going to sneak in and tuck it under his tree."

"Not at all. I was going to situate it in the right spot for his friend to buy it for him for the holidays."

"Huh?"

"My business operations aren't just confined to toy-making and sleigh rides once a year with magic reindeer."

"Oh. Business outlets."

"In a manner of speaking. Have you ever wondered how you managed to find the right gift for the right someone almost right away? A gift almost custom-made and always for someone deserving?"

"Yes ... it's only the people I *have* to buy for that I have a hard time finding things. If it's someone I love, it almost pops into my hands."

"There you are. Mind you, don't spread this around. It's company information."

"Not a word. Go on, please."

"Thank you. Well, despite Mrs. Claus's misgivings, I decided to wear my Christmas suit, it being only a week or two from the holiday. There'd be many mock Santas

Artwork by Vincent Di Fate

on the streets, spreading the spirit of the season. For any questioners, I'd say I was going to or from a charity benefit. This suit brought a lot of smiles on the flight up. In fact, I was quite a hit with two children, Lucy and Daniel. Their parents have already received their presents and for the right price."

"You gave them a discounted price?"

"Someone has to keep inflation out of the toy market, and this year it's been a doozy!" He let out a guffaw.

A couple of smiles lit up the faces of the passengers in our car. We whistled underground to the 2nd Street stop.

A silence descended on us, then I said, "So you came to Philly, bought your book, and the rest is history."

"That about wraps it up."

"I'll help you," I promised.

"Thank you, Carol." He watched the doors slam shut at 2nd Street. "We're nearly there. Do you have any other questions?"

"Do you really go down chimneys and do reindeer really fly?"

"Now those are trade secrets."

"Magic."

"Magic; a bit of the myth, the mystique. But I will tell you—the real magic lives inside you." He leaned closer, emphatically. "Where you arrive, how you travel, it's really irrelevant. It's what you have to give when you get there that counts."

I nodded.

"Any other questions?"

"How old are you?" It popped out.

His eyes lit again with that twinkle; his ruddy mouth stretched into an impossible grin. "A rather rude question for anyone but Santa Claus, eh?"

"Oh ... I'm sorry."

"No, no, no. It's quite all right." He thought of an answer, then gave it. "I'm old enough that you're all, each and every one of you, my special children."

We were at 13th Street.

"I have no further questions, your honor."

He reached over to pat my hand. "You're a good girl."

"I try." The train entered 15th Street. "This is our stop."

We got off and started toward the exit stairs. I glanced at the eastbound platform, amazed that just one hour ago I had left from there to go home from my workaday world. "Santa, wait." I strained my eyes. Across the tracks, what looked like a bag lay half-hidden under the opposite stairway. "What color was your knapsack?"

"Blue. Why?"

I pointed.

"Yes, I do believe that's it!"

"Come on. We can go through the overpass and get it."

I scurried up the stairs ahead of him, went through the passageway, and down the other side to retrieve the satchel for him.

It was missing the usual cash and credit cards but the book and his flight ticket were inside.

"What luck!" he said as I touched the book—of 19th Century French short stories—reverently, then checked his flight ticket.

"Look. Your flight's at eight o'clock. It's only 6:30. We can make it."

"If the airport limousine leaves on time."

"Come on," I said and led him out to the street and across it to an automatic bank teller. I punched in a withdrawal of $40.00.

"I believe that's your budget money," he said.

"I trust you." He said nothing, but smiled gratefully. "Come on, let's get a cab. This is your busy season, isn't it?"

"Absolutely."

A United Cab was parked in front of the Bellevue, its cabbie glad to have an airport fare. "Where ya goin', Santa? The North Pole?" he chuckled.

"Close enough," Santa answered with the customary wink.

The cab fare came to $25.00 with our generous tip. At the airport, Santa confirmed his flight at the Northwest desk and, with their help, made some phone calls about the missing credit cards. On one of those calls, a woman's voice chided him sharply. Mrs. Claus, I presume.

When his flight was called, we said good-bye in the departure area.

We shared a big hug, at first not speaking.

"I have your address. I'll reimburse you for the cab fare, Carol. Now you be careful going home."

"I will, Santa. Santa?"

"Yes?"

"Do you know what I want for Christmas?" My voice, I knew, sounded plaintive.

"Yes," he answered, "and you're going to get it."

A sigh escaped, from the depths where dreams wait. "I love you, Santa."

"I love you, too. And thank you for helping me. You know, that's the greatest gift you can give."

"Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas, Carol."

He turned to go. I watched him, a quiet man in a red suit with white fur trim, carrying a blue knapsack. As he entered the runway tunnel to his flight, he smiled and waved. I waved back.

I wondered what Santa thought I wanted for Christmas. When I'd asked him, I hadn't a blessed idea myself. Nothing material at least.

One week later, an envelope with no return address but postmarked "Anchorage, AK" and a package from California arrived in the mail. The package was from a well-known writer whom I admired and had written to a few weeks back, feeling discouraged and asking his advice. His reply lifted me back on my feet. I read his encouragement, feeling his presence, believing, caring. With the letter, he had sent a copy of his favorite book on writing. "Read it ten times," he wrote. "It should help you with some of your problems."

The envelope from Anchorage contained a Christmas card depicting Santa stuck inside a chimney, surrounded by puzzled reindeer.

I opened it to find a check for $25.00 from S. Claus. The printed text inside read: "I'm giving up cookies after Christmas ..." Under it, in handwritten script, he had written: "Thank you, Carol, and have a joyous Christmas. Santa."

I framed the letter from my favorite author, put the card in my keepsake box, gave the book its first reading, and deposited the check.

I know there may be some diehard out there, demanding proof of the plum pudding.

All I can tell you as an unofficial elf is that I believe in Santa, in myself, and have hope for the future.

And that the check didn't bounce.

Marilyn Brahen is from Philadelphia, PA where she works as a secretary and is a member of the Philadelphia Science Fiction Society and the Philadelphia SF Writers' Group. This is her first professional publication.

Vincent DiFate received a Hugo as Best Professional Artist in 1979 as well as the Skylark and the Lensman Awards. He is regarded as one of the world's major illustrators of futuristic themes, including astronomical and aerospace themes for the National Geographic Society, CBS television, and NASA. He is a past president of ASFA and was the Artist Guest of Honor at the 1992 Worldcon.

Bottled Rain

by L. S. Silverthorne

Alik thought it tears of the gods drawn from the celestial clouds of Mount Olympus, but it was just bottled rain. With downcast eyes he stared at the glass bottle, feeling the lightness in his coin pouch along with the merchant woman's mocking stare, and knew he had been taken. Father had sent him to buy charcoal and olive oil and now he'd thrown away the coins.

"I want my coins back," he demanded and shook his empty coin pouch at her.

"Why?" the woman asked and snapped her hands to her hips.

Why? Alik frowned and gazed at the other merchants lining the noisy street of the Agora. Why indeed. He had been cheated! This woman was passing herself off as a sorceress, claiming this bottle contained the magic of the gods. Father would have his head for such wanton spending.

He swept his hand across the rows of bottles on her cart. "If tears of the gods are so rare, how can you have so much of them?"

The woman's face flushed as other customers stopped examining the bottles to stare suspiciously. "The gods were, uh—very sad," she answered quickly. "It was a good harvest." She shooed him away. "Now, run along. You're blocking the light."

He squinted at her. "If this really is a bottle of gods' tears, then what will they do?"

"They are gods' tears," she said with a caustic laugh. "They can do everything...anything."

"Could I cure boils with them?"

"Of course," the woman said with an indignant snort.

"Could I— tame wild animals with them?"

She thought for a moment. "I suppose."

The other customers gathered around, amused by their bickering.

"They're tears of the gods, aren't they?" she shouted and poked him sharply in the chest.

"How do I know that?" Alik rubbed a hand across his coarse wool chiton where her nail had gouged him.

"How do you know the sun has set?"

He laughed. "Because it turns dark."

The woman tapped one of the bottles. "So how do you know these are not tears of the gods unless you use them?"

"I must first see the sun rise before I can see it set."

Murmurs rippled through the crowd.

"So you are telling me that you must first see the gods cry before you believe in their tears?"

He thought for a moment. "Yes."

The woman gasped and covered her mouth with her hand. "Blasphemy! I have seen people struck by Zeus's thunderbolts for less. Do you dare dispute the gods?"

People cried out and stepped back from him as if fearing a lightning bolt would strike him dead. Alik groaned. A clever woman she was, one who had outsmarted him twice now. If he disputed her claim, phrased as it was, then he would dishonor his house in front of all the city.

"No," he answered softly.

"Another satisfied customer," she said in a boisterous tone and held up a bottle. "Who else will purchase a bottle?"

With a sigh, he slipped out of the writhing crowd. Bottled rain. He shook his head. It was nothing more than bottled rain. How would he explain this to Father? He passed an old beggar woman sitting on the slick marble steps of the Odeion as he started back toward home. She watched him for a moment and finally spoke.

"So you fell for that bottle of gods' tears too, aye?"

He leaned against the wall. "Afraid so," he replied.

The old woman smiled. "I did too once. Lost an entire week's wage on one of those bottles. With the Festival of Pomegranates soon at hand, that woman convinced me I needed those gods' tears to pay homage to Aphrodite — to mourn Adonis. That merchant woman is quite an elocutionist."

"It's a pity I couldn't bring her home with me...so she could explain the loss of my coins to my father. He'll be furious when I come home with no charcoal to keep us warm and no oil for cooking."

"A hard lesson to learn."

He nodded and stared at the bottle for a long while.

"How much did you pay for that bottle of rain?"

"Three coins."

The old woman winced. "She got a lot out of you."

"How do you know it's just bottled rain?" he asked and dropped down on

his haunches.

"Saw her in the olive groves yesterday, filling the bottles as it rained."

"How could I believe she had bottled magic?" He turned away, back toward the merchants.

"Wait," the woman called. She slipped a bottle of oil from her cloth sack. "I have enough oil to spare this one bottle. Take this to your father."

"Thank you," he said, "but I have nothing to give you in return — except this rainwater."

She smiled. "A fair trade for a thirsty old woman."

With a nod, Alik accepted the oil and set his bottled rain on the step. The old woman snatched up the bottle in her gnarled hands. Quickly, she yanked the cork from the bottle and sprinkled the water over her head. In moments, the wrinkles on her face faded and her hair darkened until he was staring at a young woman.

"You—you lied to me," he shouted and pointed a finger at her. "You said it was just bottled rain!"

She tossed her silky dark mane back and cackled. "I told you the truth, silly boy. It was bottled rain. Aphrodite's tears are rains from the heavens that were gathered in her sacred olive grove on the eve of the Festival of Pomegranates."

"And the merchant gathered Aphrodite's tears as she mourned for Adonis in the olive groves." Alik cringed. "You tricked me."

"Perhaps I did," she said, "but for one who must see the sunrise to believe in the sunset, it was easy to do. You will do well to learn more about the gods you serve."

"But why did you need my bottle?"

"When I bought a bottle, I asked for the wisdom of the ages — and I aged fifty years." She shook her head. "An attendant of Aphrodite's temple cannot be old, young man, so I was forced to beg for my living. And a beggar would have to beg a lifetime to earn those three coins you paid for this bottle. Now, I can return to the temple."

She flitted down the steps, but stopped on the last one. "You should have believed in the magic while you had it."

Turning sharply in her sandals, she pranced into the crowded Agora toward the pillared temple of Aphrodite. He watched her pause beside a tall basket in the threshold and pluck out a pomegranate.

✾

L. S. Silverthorne is a graduate student at Purdue and a technical writer on the side. She enjoys raising goldfish and showing her Persian cat. This is her first professional publication.

Letters to the Editor

ONE ARTIST TO ANOTHER

Vincent Di Fate, Wappingers Falls, NY

Just a brief note to compliment you on your good judgement in commissioning a painting from Richard Powers to grace the cover of issue #21. While much of the artwork both in and on *MZB FANTASY* has been of high quality, I believe Powers' uniquely individualized approach to subjects of the fantastic adds greater range to the visual presence of the magazine.

I've wanted to ask Richard Powers to do a cover since the day Marion asked me to take this job. I finally felt I had an appropriate story for his work. Glad you liked the cover. Coming from an artist of your stature, this is high praise indeed! —REH

A BELATED VOTE

Chel Avery, Oaklyn, NJ

Your comments in Issue 21 have finally shamed me into writing a letter I meant to write after your first issue.

I want you to know that at least one reader loved the story "Moonrise". I still remember reading it with some puzzlement, not sure if I liked it or not, coming to the end and thinking "huh?" for just a moment, then the thrilling "click" as all the pieces snapped together and made sense. I immediately went back to the beginning and read it again, this time appreciating how well it was put together. There is no story you have published since then that I remember with as much delight and appreciation.

YOU WIN SOME...

Traci Dowen, Burton, OH

I just wanted to write and thank you for your critique of my story, "Greater Vision". You pointed out some weaknesses I failed to see. Thank you. To be honest, I was nervous about submitting a story to your magazine but in the future won't be. And don't worry about the form letter, I found it to be right to the point and very helpful.

...YOU LOSE SOME

Norman A. Cukras, Sebring, FL

I am a recipient of one of those form letters that you loathe to send to writers. I believe you sent me #1256A. I'm trying to break into writing and I must admit that my pile of rejection letters is becoming most impressive, even though most of them are form. But your letter has been the only one that has offended me personally. Your letter accuses me of using "offensive language". The first word in my story is "Damn!" and that is it. I don't really consider the word offensive, but if you do, it could have easily been changed to "Rats!" or anything else that you might feel is more suitable for your readership. But to return the manuscript inferring that a major rewrite was required because it was riddled with offensive language is not an accusation that I can easily accept.

A form letter, by definition, will not fit any given situation perfectly. Sometimes the choice of response is based on first impressions and appears out of context with respect to the whole (see "MZB Talks to Writers" in this issue). It was, by the way, only form letter #17.—HRJ

STIRRING THE CAULDRON

Alan Lattimore, Colchester, VT

I was disappointed to see that "Daughter of the Blood" didn' t manage to make it in the top three for the Cauldron results. I think Solange did an amazing job of bringing a different society to realization within the limits of a short story. And at 18? I'm doubly impressed. More than impressed. Jealous.

All any of us can do is cast our vote and see what comes out. (And you—yes you, the reader—do you send in your Cauldron vote?) —HRJ

Cauldron voting is an important avenue for you to voice your opinions. (One recent voter assigned numbers higher than the total number of stories in that issue, to tell us how badly they disliked a couple of them, which made us chuckle; but at least the point was made.) If you want to write additional comments on your ballot, we do read them; but at least take the time to vote and mail in your ballot. —REH

A Song for Herrmann

by Paul A. Carter

I suppose it all began when I forgot to turn off the moon.

That was thirty years ago at the Mountain State Summer Theater. It was a typical catch-and-scratch operation — rehearse one show while another was in production, and between times pound nails and paint flats for a third. Everybody did a bit of everything — box office, costumes, acting, you name it. That particular week I was tending props, including the live hen we were going to use in the following week's production, and in the evenings I was running the light board.

Most of us were enthusiastic, stagestruck amateurs. Some had pretensions of being in the Theatah; a few — a saving few — had real talent. And then there was Romaine.

She could walk into a room and half-turn, and every eye would lock onto her. She was short and petite, but you forgot that the instant she spoke, in a voice which came out low and full. Actually she was not an actress but a singer; she'd won a couple of prize competitions and had a Town Hall recital, with the usual nice but meaningless notices afterward — so many fine artists *don't* make it in the music business! — and she'd spent the previous summer at Tanglewood and soloed there. It was hard to imagine such a small person as Romaine belting out Wagner, but we heard by grapevine that her rendering of Brunhilde's Immolation scene — soaring gloriously over the Boston Symphony's fullest crescendos, with unexpected help from a thunderstorm that chose that dramatic moment to break and rumble over the Berkshires — had brought the jaded vacationers and inhibited Bostonians in the audience out of their seats at the end in an outcry of wild joy.

And now here she was at Mountain State.

The reason Romaine gave for joining up with us clunkers was that she needed some nonmusical acting experience. It was true that she had lately played some musical comedy roles out on the Coast with but indifferent success. Some grand opera and lieder singers aren't at home with the lighter stuff, and of course this was long before Beverly Sills showed the world that you can have fun with both. But I thought there was more to it than that. Something, or some*body*, had happened to Romaine back there in New York or Lenox, and she was out here at Mountain State among our sighing pines and pungent sagebrush to forget.

Anyhow, that week we were doing a pair of avant-garde British one-act plays, and she was in one of them. A nonspeaking part, actually, until her big scene at the very end. The plot, such as it is, has everybody else in the play giving this character advice on what she ought to be doing, and then she tells them all off. Curtain. A nice exercise for Romaine's professional purpose, because until that closing tirade she had to be silent and do it all with body English and facial takes.

I was cueing the incidental music and working the lights. Midway through the short play it broke into two scenes, signaled by slowly dimming down the lights, holding it a couple of seconds, and bringing them up again. The actress, who hadn't spoken a word for the whole first scene, stood in the "moonlight" — I was quite proud of the inexpensive gels I'd rigged to get that effect — and let her face tell the story as the light faded. This was theater in the half-round, seating only about sixty people on two sides of the stage, and they sat close enough to allow some quite subtle facial acting.

In the dress rehearsal that scene had drawn murmurs of approval. On opening night I was as entranced as everyone else — and I forgot to turn off the moon.

Romaine got off the stage okay — show must go on, as they say — and back on for her next entrance. She played the final scene, took her curtain call with a dazzling smile, exited backstage and double-quick-marched around to my homemade control booth. She didn't yell, or use sarcasm, or swear, although I think she could have. All she did was look at me, hard. That was quite enough. After a seeming eternity she spun on her heel and took herself away. Gingerly I stepped down from my perch and made my own hang-dog exit. For the first time that summer I passed up an opening-night cast party.

So I was bowled over when Romaine came up to me in the dressing room the

next evening and asked me to walk her home after the show.

Apprehensive — wondering if she had spent the intervening time looking for and finding the words she had not thought of the night before — I turned off the house lights, secured the turntable and light board, and walked through the backstage area (where we also stored our props and costumes) to the stage door. There I nearly collided with a big, thick-shouldered man in an expensive-looking business suit — incongruous summer wear — who stood, or almost crouched, over Romaine.

For once her serenely noncommittal offstage face had slipped. She looked around him and up at me with what seemed real terror.

Despite having delivered a couple of impassioned speeches on that tiny stage just a few nights before, I was as tongue-tied as a Cub Scout. Romaine solved my problem: "Let's go," she said, and took my hand. I had to stumble around the large man, and then we were down the steps and on our way. Romaine tucked her elbow companionably under mine, and at the same time subtly tugged so that we fairly flew down the gravel path toward the cabin where she was staying. As we turned into the double row of ponderosa pines behind the theater I hazarded a look over my shoulder. The fellow in the suit was still standing under the stage door's single naked light bulb. Abruptly then, perhaps having caught my eye upon him, he shrugged and walked off toward the car lot.

"Who's *he*?" I could not help asking.

"Don't ask," she shot back, and I had the sense to change the subject.

The walk was very pleasant. Between the dark pine-shadows spilled the rays of a real moon — not my dime — store contraption. I tried to stammer out an apology for my goof of the previous evening, and Romaine laughingly cut me off. Quite naturally we began to walk with our arms around each other, and at her door we kissed. But that was all. A theater troupe, or what passes for one, is an ingrown, hugsy-kissy community, but in those days people didn't automatically roll into bed at first touch. Not, at least, at Mountain State.

And that was the way it stayed, the next night and the night after that and the last night after we had finished striking the set. Then we were in a play together, and at the prospect of playing even a five-minute scene with Romaine I was ecstatic — and scared to death. The dress rehearsal was, inevitably, a disaster. Somehow Romaine got me through the actual opening performance, improvising to cover several of my blown lines. It's a mark of a really fine actor or actress to be able to play to even the gawkiest amateurs and make them look good, and I got some applause on my own curtain call.

Overwhelmed with emotion, I grabbed for her — that's the only word for it — as we came out the stage door. She moved in comfortably against my shirt and her mouth came up to mine. Then, suddenly, her body stiffened. She looked over my shoulder. Still hanging on, I reluctantly turned my head — and there he was. Leaning against the wall this time, and smoking a cigarette.

We walked away; I fought an urge to run. Finally, in the shelter of the trees, I blurted out: "Romaine, it's none of my business, but — who *is* he?"

Her voice was dull, with none of an actress's luster. "His name's Herrmann Kroll." She pronounced it "Hairmahn", as if to emphasize his foreign origin. "You'll know him soon enough — he got a part in the tryouts today for our next show."

I could feel her shudder, and it was not just because those mountain evenings were cold. Our next show — the last of the season — was going to be The Merry Widow, and I had already heard that a total stranger had walked in to the tryouts that afternoon and landed the coveted part of Prince Danilo. Since Romaine would of course play Sonia, they would be together almost constantly for the duration of the show.

The low, toneless voice continued. "This man's family has hounded my family all across Europe. A Judge Kroll sent one of my relatives to the salt mines; before that an Inquisitor Kroll condemned another as a witch. My people fought back—" She stopped, as if not wanting to complete that sentence. "When my grandparents went on a family visit to the old country, they took me along. We went to a beach on the Adriatic — not a resort, back then, just a nice, unlittered place to swim. And *he* saw me there. I was sixteen.

"Since then this man has followed me everywhere. He was at Juilliard, and then the Conservatoire. He sent up flowers at my debut, and champagne after Town Hall. I tried everything. Snubs. Insults. Threats. Calling the police. Nothing turns him off. 'Body and soul' he's going to have me, he says. I surrounded myself with escorts — that's not hard," she said with a wan smile. *For you, no,* I mentally added, *and damn it, Romaine, you haven't been fair.* Sensing my reaction she pressed closer to me: "You've been wonderful, and you're one reason I didn't just quit the company when I learned he was here. I was going to, but a person can't run and hide forever."

Nothing more was said until we reached her door. Our good-night kiss was long, sweet, and searching, but on Romaine's part not really passionate. She pushed me away gently, and slipped inside. I heard the lock click and a bolt slide home. *Just like a Manhattan apartment,* I thought. *What we came out here to get away from.*

On the whole, however, my mood was euphoric. With a happy buzz in my head, but without the mindfog that goes with beer, I practically skipped up the path. As I crossed in back of the darkened theater I was even whistling —

The roar of a car engine defiled the night! Headlights came on, dazzling-bright, and a chrome radiator grille came charging at me. I barely had time to jump aside. The car stopped and backed, roaring, and then I was in a tiny cul-de-sac between the theater and the main arts building. Frantically I tore at a basement window. Nobody had locked it, and I got it open and scrambled through. On the other side of the thick walls I could hear the car race off, gunning like a teenager's and rattling the gravel, as I pelted up the deserted stairs.

Directors don't get much sleep during an intensive summer of repertory, and the light was still on in Joe's office. I staggered in and collapsed into a broken-down leather armchair. Joe looked up from his prompt book, with instant concern. I fought for breath and got the words out: "Herrmann Kroll just tried to kill me."

Joe put on his wise and skeptical look. It was most irritating, but he had had years and years of listening to self-centered, paranoid actors and actresses pouring out evil tales about each other. ("You've *got* to change the blocking — she's upstaging me, and I won't stand for it!") I told him all I could, and the skeptical look faded.

I knew he wasn't about to fire Herrmann from the cast; the show must go on. After all, I did not know for certain Kroll had been behind that wheel — I had not seen him.

"All right," Joe said at last. "Tell you what, I'll send for her parents. They live

just up the valley, on the quarter-section her grandfather homesteaded. I wanted them here on Opening Night anyway."

They came in the next afternoon, and quite a welcoming party of us took time out from rehearsing and painting scenery to meet them at the train station. When they stepped down to the platform I began to understand why our director had called Romaine's parents rather than the police. Her father — sun-bronzed, with a farmer's or rancher's white band from eyebrows to hairline where he normally wore a hat — looked like the kind of person you would instantly pick if you had to go into the hills with a posse, or a guerrilla band. He wore his hair long, like a Native American, but surely he wasn't; Romaine had told me the family was European. On closer view the nose and facial planes were Slavic, with perhaps some heritage from the American Indians' ethnic kin the Mongols, who in their day had swept all the way from Central Asia to the Hungarian plains. The mother at first glance seemed less impressive; Romaine clearly had inherited her short stature from her. But there was a quiet wisdom in the seamed round face, an athletic quickness in the old woman's step, and a leashed fierceness behind those dark, hooded eyes.

They moved in with their daughter right away, and thereafter at night we *all* walked Romaine home to her cabin. I was never much for small talk, even in a gabby theater crowd, and this pair was as silent as the mountains. The arrangement also ended, at least for the time, my romantic hopes with Romaine; but first things came first, I knew.

Meanwhile the rest of the cast was caught up in the excitement of a new and final show. *The Merry Widow!* — just the kind of absurd choice a postage-stamp-sized theater like ours could have been expected to make. Actors colliding with each other backstage as they ran in and out doubling up the parts. No masses of whirling dancers — where would we have put them? — and a chorus that numbered all of six. No room in that tiny space for anything to back the singers with, except a clunky old upright piano. Even Joe, a lifelong risk-taker, might not have accepted this challenge had not the very able lady who was our costume mistress nagged him into it, so she could fill the stage in the Maxim's scene with turn-of-the-century Parisian color and flounce. And of course there was Romaine; but one singer, no matter how good — as some city opera companies have yet to learn! — can't carry a whole show alone.

Nevertheless on Opening Night it all, as they say in show business, "worked." Several of those old church-choir singers in the chorus had quite passable voices; at least they could follow direction, which in choral work is everything. A gaunt retired schoolteacher who had been struggling stiffly with bit parts all summer suddenly bloomed into a hilarious Baron Popoff. And Imogene, who came to rehearsals in low-cut peasant blouses and short short skirts and flung her torso at every male in sight, turned out to have a light but acceptable mezzo and a real knack for comic timing. She had been doing most of the soubrette parts in our shows, and in this one she made a very effective Natalie.

Romaine played the widowed Sonia, not as a conniving man-snarer — which it would be very easy to do — but as a modern young woman struggling to find and keep her autonomy, a familiar idea nowadays but a novel one for tourist summer theater goers thirty years ago. When she sang "Vilia", she stopped the show in its tracks. Joe, who wasn't much for encores — he said it prompted squawks of "If her, why not me?" — nodded happily at the pianist, who turned back a few pages and began the song again. They wouldn't let Romaine quit until she had sung it twice more.

And Herrmann Kroll, whose voice was more baritone than tenor, performed Prince Danilo as if he had been born into the part.

There are at least two ways the male lead can play the Merry Widow Waltz scene. Dancing with Sonia, Danilo — interpreted as a man in the grip of conflicting emotions — can get to the song's last line, which ought to be "I love you," and then break away from her in confusion, truly loving the wealthy widow and yet not wanting to be condemned as a fortune hunter. The other way is to play him as a debonair, never-to-be-entrapped bachelor, for whom women are not commitments but scalps. And that's the way Kroll played him. Waltzing his partner around, he brought her to a full stop in the line "I lo—" and, after a suspenseful pause, laughed in her face! The sexual electricity between them was very real. To his combination of suaveness and *machismo* Romaine countered with true Viennese pluck, wit, and flirty evasion, so that her character's "surrender" in the show's closing lines didn't fool anyone. The tension between Herrmann and Romaine had crossed the footlights, and the audience responded with cheers and applause that rattled the little theater's windows.

Joe had planned a small formal reception in the theater lobby afterward — raw red wine and stinky cheese, with fruit punch for the Methodists — both because it was the season's last show and because there were a couple of potential financial angels in the house. Deftly he lined us up, in expectable rank order except that Romaine was flanked by her father and mother. The young leading lady presented her cheek to me for a chaste brotherly peck and then I took my place down at the other end of the line.

And Herrmann Kroll, still in his Prince Danilo costume, walked in.

The conversational buzz faded and died.

He strode over to Romaine, his black boots gleaming, and possessively took her arm.

And a deep, sonorous voice next to him rolled out like the blast of a horn: *"Kroll! Herrmann Kroll!"*

Romaine's father raised both his hands, and after a dramatic pause he began to chant. It was no language I had ever heard, and ex officio I've had to learn quite a few. It was arrhythmic and modal, and it sent a chill down my back. Then the mother joined her voice antiphonally with his, and her hands began to weave a pattern in the air.

The summer night was still and we were indoors, but a dank, cold wind began to blow, with a dusty, spicy scent.

Kroll turned white. The extended arm dropped loosely to his side. His knees shook. Looking sick, he bolted for the door.

My people fought back, Romaine had said.

The chanting stopped. "A, uh, family blessing," Joe explained to some of the punch-sipping guests. It was a barefaced lie, but it stopped the rising chatter.

The strange odor faded, displaced by the clouds of cigarette smoke that hung over most social gatherings in those days. The reception resumed, and a booming beefy Babbitt-type announced that he was making a contribution to the theater, so I suppose the evening was a success.

I didn't get to see Romaine afterward. The inevitable cast party moved clear across the river, and she and her folks didn't attend.

Next day at noon, hung-over cast members began drifting into the green room for a line rehearsal. Romaine was prompt

as usual, and she flashed me a look of relief and gratitude. Imogene, just as typically, was late and grouchy, and Herrmann didn't show up at all.

Frowning, Joe sent somebody out to the parking lot. Kroll's big car wasn't there. Then Joe got on the phone with the hotel; our Prince Danilo had not deigned to camp out with us lowly actors in the dormitory. The desk crisply informed Joe that Mr. Kroll had checked out late the night before.

A furious argument erupted. Should we cancel? Should we give the angel back his money? Our newly triumphant Baron Popoff wanted to go on; so did I. Imogene, bored, wanted to quit. Romaine said nothing. In the end Joe himself, after an intensive afternoon with the book, made up at the dressing table as Danilo and we went on.

Second night letdowns after a great opening are a normal hazard, but this one was unusually severe. Kroll hadn't even shed his Danilo costume before fleeing; he must have thrown it in a trash can or stuffed it in his suitcase, we thought, because they never found it at the hotel. So our wardrobe lady's fingers flew that afternoon as she cut and patched and sewed some of our shabby Elizabethan stuff — completely out of period — and ten minutes before curtain time Joe put it on. Joe was a natural comic with a remarkable memory — he never fluffed a line — but a singing voice he just didn't have, and he had to fake through the big numbers in a kind of *Sprechgesang*.

Romaine was rock-solid; there's a saying that the real difference between amateurs and professionals is that the pros can do the job when they don't feel like it. She was captivating, intelligent, sexy, and — more than she had shown the night before — a grand comedienne. But the challenge of her dark foil was gone. With no disrespect intended for Joe, it was at times as if she played to a blank place in the air. Even the great "Vilia" number was a letdown, and that night there was no encore.

I came around by the stage door afterward and we walked to her cabin. Her parents had gone home, and I wouldn't have been human not to have felt a wild, heart-pounding, breath-catching surge of hope that "here's my chance." But that is not the way it was. At the door she kissed me tenderly, and said: "You are a kind, sweet man. You risked your life to give me my freedom. But please, dear — don't fall in love with me. It would not be good for you." And then she was gone.

Liberated at last, she would set forth, I knew, on a great career.

As I've told you, all of this was thirty years ago. I assumed that the story ended then. Ten days ago, Fate delivered the final chapter, and I'm not sure even yet that the story's over.

One of my old profs at Mountain State University retired: a wizened little guy who had been hired to teach Forestry Botany to freshmen, but who spent much of his classroom time teaching Aristotle, Trotskyism, Freud, and human wisdom in general. A whole bunch of his former students were lured back for a farewell dinner. While waiting around at the bar before going into the banquet room, I picked up a *Daily Mountaineer* for the first time in a quarter-century, and thus I learned that Romaine that same weekend was going to sing an outdoor concert at Elkhorn Lake, eighty miles away. The picture with the news story gave evidence that she was one of those specially blessed show people who grow more beau-

tiful as they get older, like Lena Horne or Joan Baez.

Knowing when it was time — as a singer must — Romaine not long since had retired from the opera and concert stage to her parents' old home; they had just recently died, the newspapers said. Quite often locally, I gathered, she still sang. One eccentric millionaire with a rustic lakeside chalet had been putting on fresh-air concerts at his place for several summers, the paper explained, and Romaine had become something of an annual tradition there. Only the local patricians actually got invited to the grassy lawn in front of the chalet, but the plebeians were welcome to park their motorboats nearby, or sit on logs at the Forest Service campground on the opposite shore.

Elkhorn Lake is one of those clear, clean, deep mountain ponds so lovely you hate to tell other people about them, lest they all come tromping in and spoil the austere purity. In the summertime the chalet and a few other cabins near the lake's outlet are pretty busy, with divers and swimmers and water-skiers and speedboats and rock radios. But it gets pretty quiet between there and the far end where the fishermen drift back and forth in their tin boats, just out from where the creek comes in, winding down from unseen high snowfields.

Most of the shore is Forest Service land, and the steep hillsides of dark spruce and pale Western larch and scrubby lodgepole pine hunch over and drop down right to the water's edge. A gap in the hills at the upper end of the Lake gives a glimpse of the grey-fanged, glacier-scarred Grizzly Mountain Wilderness; the lower end opens into a view across to the blocky, snow-covered Wild Goose Range.

The public campground across from Snob Point, as the irreverent tent-campers called it, has been there for years, and except at seasonal peaks it is surprisingly little used. The gravel road in from the highway is kept in good repair, most summers. This year on the night of Romaine's concert it was packed with concertgoers' cars, pickups, and RVs all the way from the campground to the one-lane bridge over the lower creek. I had a long walk in to the lake shore.

I found a place to sit, on a cut stump with the water lapping at my feet. It was late, very late on one of those endless green-gold summer afternoons you get at the northwest edge of the Mountain Time zone. In front of me there was quite a bit of noisy coming and going, as power boats jockeyed for a better view. Some of the people on the shore were trying to shush them.

"Ladies and gentlemen..." Across the way, amplified by a surprisingly good PA system, the chalet's owner was welcoming his guests.

With a burbling roar, one last motor boat churned in, reversed gears to slow itself, and cut. The man behind the wheel stood up to throw his cement-block anchor overboard. He was wearing — dear God! — he was wearing a navy-blue jacket cut like a band uniform, crossed by a bemedalled red sash, with epaulettes the size of hairbrushes.

Prince Danilo's costume, that our wardrobe mistress had sewn three decades ago.

The face had narrowed; new, hard lines marked the mouth. The barrel chest had gone to fat. But this was, quite unmistakably, Herrmann Kroll.

Coincidence? I don't believe in coincidences. Not any more.

And then he saw me.

"Ah, Little Boy Blue," he said in his pleasantest tone. "How appropriate that we should meet on this occasion."

I had to know. "Why are you here?"

He grinned tautly. "After the concert I shall drive my boat over to the point and offer my congratulations. And then — then at last I shall have Romaine." His eyes gleamed in hate and triumph. "*Her parents are dead.* No one shall stop me now. Unless," he added condescendingly, "*you* care to try."

It was an invitation I nearly accepted, although even after thirty years Kroll could still have broken me in two. From within his uniform jacket, just for insurance, he pulled out an automatic pistol, a Luger, looking at me with contempt as he ostentatiously laid it on the boat's transom.

Just at that moment the first plangent note of a piano drifted across the lake, and Romaine began to sing.

Old war horses, mostly, suitable for the chalet's audience; "Giannina Mia" and "You'll Never Walk Alone" and "The Last Rose of Summer." She made something fresh and compelling out of all of them. And then she sang "Vilia."

There once was a Vilia, a witch of the wood,
A hunter beheld her, alone as she stood...

And all at once the mystery of Romaine and her family began to make frightening sense.

There's a short choral introduction to "Vilia", a passage she of course was not singing now: "Our folk tell us of spirit maids / That haunt our woods and glens and glades / We call them Vilias in our tongue..."

Their tongue. The tongue of "Marsovia", the imaginary homeland of the Merry Widow, somewhere in that strange Central European heartland where tough mountain folk have endured for centuries in their high, rocky natural fortresses. Resisting — and often defeating — Romans and Goths, Crusaders and Turks, Russians and Germans, Fascists and communists; united against outsiders, divided among themselves; practicing ancient arts in furtherance of their hereditary enmities — it is not hard to imagine such a folk peopling their woods and glens and glades with spirits, dryads, casters of spells. Vilias.

Vilia, O Vilia! the witch of the wood...

The forested cliffsides, darkening now with sunset, echoed the song, which thus seemed spookily to be coming out of the trees themselves — as if sung not across the lake through a microphone but near us, by a veritable witch of the wood.

The distant piano swept through four transitional bars. Romaine took up the second verse:

The wood-maiden smiled, and no answer she gave,
But beckon'd him into the shade of the cave...

And another insight came, cold upon the first: Romaine knew Herrmann was here.

The song drew to its close: *Sadly he sigh'd, Vilia,* with the soloist on the last word moving up from E to G and then sustaining for three measures a magical, pianissimo high B.

And I knew that the chorus, had there been one, would have been softly singing under her: "For love he died."

A terrible cry cut through the spatter of applause from the campground. Herrmann Kroll leaped over the side of the boat, clutching the pistol. I jumped up and followed him. Amplified applause from the chalet continued to crackle through the PA system as we each twisted and dodged between parked cars and ran past the boat launch. "Thank you," Romaine told her guests over the water. "Thank you very much."

Twilight lake reflections showed me the way to the head of the forest trail that led into the protected wilderness area. Then the dark trees closed in. Expecting to need it when the concert was over I had carried a flashlight, which I now clicked on.

Herrmann's crashing, trampling feet in their boots were faster than mine in their city shoes. The distance between us lengthened and the sound of his footsteps faded. Once, faintly, I thought I heard him cry out again.

I slowed down, carefully picking my way along the trail. It turned in a sharp switchback and climbed steeply. I fought for breath in the cold evening air. I thought I had lost Kroll. Then my swinging flashlight beam picked out a glint of metal. The Luger.

The pathway dropped into a hollow, swerving to avoid a giant red cedar. Herrmann Kroll stood up against that tree, facing it, his arms clutching its rough, deeply corrugated bark. I stepped closer.

The parallel vertical ridges and fissures of cedar bark covered him, up the back of his legs clear to his hips. The rest of him below the waist was somehow *inside* the tree.

I shed the light on his face. The eyes were open and staring. The face held terror, pain, and — yes — a kind of ecstatic fulfillment. I turned the flashlight off.

He had it coming. But it was a terrible vengeance Romaine had taken, in this latest round of the blood-feud between her family and the Krolls.

The cars were moving out by the time I got back to the campground. I stopped at the first ranger station on the way down and told them what to look for.

That led to some nasty questions. They found the tree, and they found the Luger.

And that was all. Eventually, for want of any evidence, they let me go.

I hope, for the sake of Herrmann Kroll's tormented soul, that someone cuts that tree down.

Romaine disappeared right after the concert. She left the chalet but did not return to her home, where the rural mail carrier found the windows shuttered and the gate locked.

It was a kindness, I keep telling myself, for her to have warned me off those long years ago. (*"It would not be good for you."*) For now I know that under the surface of Franz Lehar's rollicking Viennese comic opera run dark currents of ancient sorcery. There were — there *are* — spirit maids who haunt the woods and glens. And at least one of them is alive in North America.

And the feeling haunts me that one day I will put on a backpack and walk into the forest to look for her.

Soon.

❀

PAUL A. CARTER has had stories in *Analog*, *F&SF*, and an Arkham House anthology, **TRAVELLERS BY NIGHT**. He notes that the setting for this story really exists, under another name, but "the fishing there is excellent and an unwritten law among fisherpeople forbids disclosing the location."

GEORGE BARR contributes often to *FANTASY Magazine* and lives in California and has been a professional artist since 1960. He has won a Hugo as Best Fan Artist and has been nominated in the Professional Artist category as well.

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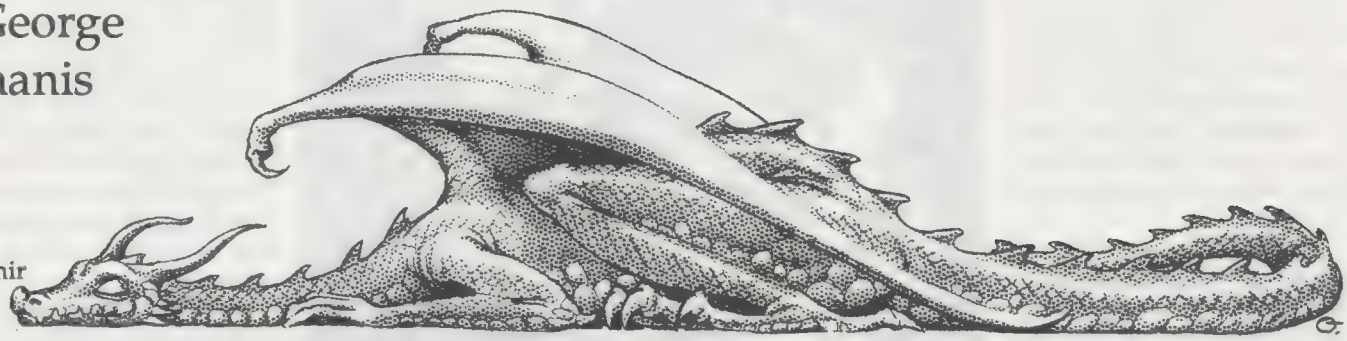
THE LAST DRAGON

by George Gemanis



Valdmir was old, even for a dragon. His glorious wings had become dull and shriveled. His thunderous roar had dwindled to a hoarse cough that couldn't frighten a sparrow. A flaming breath that once had melted tempered steel, now failed to ignite a small pile of dry leaves.

It was not good to be old.

How long since he had soared above the mountains with his mate, playing tag through the misty clouds, brushing his wing tips against the loftiest crags?

Once he thought he saw another dragon. But it was only a metal flying machine. In his despair, he broke it open and poured the tiny humans out. He could hear their thin screams as they twisted down through endless space.

It was not good to be old, and worse to be lonely.

How old was he? Not even Valdmir knew. He couldn't remember being young. He had watched the building of the Great Wall of China, the Pyramids of Egypt. Even then, he had been old. The Grand Canyon had formed under his curious eyes. How long ago had that been?

1993 Hugo Award Winner ***1991 World SF Convention Special Award***

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Also, occasional columns by Vincent Di Fate, Frederik Pohl and Robert Silverberg.

All in a package that's clean, attractive, with minimal use of continued lines. And every issue has outstanding color cover artwork, by David Mattingly, Barclay Shaw, Kelly Freas, Ed Emshwiller, Tom Kidd, Don Maitz, and many others.

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It was even worse to be old, and lonely and forgetful.

Perhaps it would be better to be dead. At least he would no longer be old, or lonely.

Where should a dragon go to die? Not in the sea. He shuddered at the thought of being devoured by small, slimy creatures. Nor in the desert, where the sun turned you into leather, without dignity, to be stared at for centuries.

A dragon's bier should be majestic. The mountains, that's where a dragon should go to die. Some high, remote place.

Valdmir spread his wings for a last flight. His need drove him up until the air thinned, and the sun became a blinding ball of light. He circled the earth searching for the highest mountain. He soared, climbing higher. Ice formed on his wings, weighing him down. His lungs strained to catch the last wisps of air.

His sight was fading, his strength failing, when he found the ice cave at the pinnacle of a majestic peak. With a final effort, he struggle to land in a blue grotto, his life force drained.

This was a tomb fit for a dragon — an immense cathedral of translucent blue ice. He tucked his head beneath his wing for the last time. Soon he would no longer feel old or alone. Valdmir was content.

For a thousand and a thousand years, the snows of winter fell around him. Spring rains washed the mountain clean, and autumn winds howled through vast canyons. Valdmir no longer heard them. He was sealed in his tomb.

Uncounted summers passed him by, until a new sound shattered the frozen silence. It was the thunk, thunk of an ice axe.

"Valdmir, Valdmir. Awake, Valdmir," a voice shouted.

He didn't want to wake up. He had enjoyed being dead. Who was this creature who summoned him back into a world of loneliness and pain?

"Valdmir." Again, the shout called him from his sleep.

He withdrew his head from under his wing and looked through blurred eyes at the small figure clinging to the wall of ice. It was a girl with snow flakes sparkling in her yellow hair.

One puff of his breath would blow this nuisance from her perch and send her spinning down the mountain. Then he remembered the people in the metal machine. He heard their screams once more.

"What do you want, Human?"

"Only to see you," the girl replied. "No one but I believes you exist. People say the stories about you are lies, that there are no dragons. I climbed the mountain to prove them wrong."

"You have seen me. Now, go back down the mountain and leave me in peace," Valdmir said. He closed his eyes.

"I must rest a moment before I start," the girl said. "It's a long way home. My feet are frozen."

"You were foolish to risk your life just to see me."

"No one else in the world has seen a dragon. Songs will be written about me. My name will be remembered."

"Is that so important?" Valdmir shook the snow and ice from his body. He thrust his head out into the sunshine. "You will die before you reach the foot of the mountain."

The girl sat in the snow at lip of the cave. Small puffs of mist escaped from her mouth when she breathed. "Still, I will try. The people must be told the old stories are true."

Valdmir unfolded his wings. They were no longer faded. They glowed with all the brilliant colors of a rainbow. Valdmir roared. Not a meek, humble sound, but a gigantic roar that shook the crags and sent avalanches pouring down the mountain side. A sheet of flame spouted from his throat. It melted the snow on the peak and sent streams of water coursing through the canyons.

Valdmir reached out a great claw to pick up the human. This weak creature had braved the mountain to find a dragon. She must not be allowed to die there on the lonely crag.

"I will take you home," Valdmir said.

He spread his wings and soared off into the blue sky, dodging through the clouds as he spiraled down toward the distant earth.

Being old wasn't so bad. Nor was being lonely. Even being dead was bearable.

The worst thing of all was to be forgotten.

GEORGE GEMANIS started off not as a writer, but as an artist, specializing in seascapes. He started writing a couple of years ago. He's a native of Fresno, California where he grew up, got a degree in art and English, and currently lives.

GEORGE BARR drew the dragon. George lives in California; his artwork has won numerous awards including the Hugo. His distinctive style has been seen recently in *Weird Tales* and in *Pulphouse*, as well as *FANTASY Magazine*.

Edgewood Press

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Garry Kilworth

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—Michael Bishop

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"Venus Rising is, like everything Carol Emshwiller writes, original, funny, eccentric, thought-provoking, heart-breaking, and utterly enchanting!"
—Connie Willis

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Heartless

by Pauline J. Alama

"How *can* you turn away from me?—You know how I love you."

The pair had been speaking in soft tones but now their voices rose, and in the nearby square, ears pricked up.

"I don't want to lie to you."

"I don't want you to lie to me; I want you to love me."

"How can I? Love comes or it doesn't. Let me go!" she shrieked then, for he seized her roughly by the arms. (The whole village had lifted its head.)

"You—you cold *thing*. You slow torture," he shouted into her face. "Where is your heart?"

"It's at the bottom of the well, if you want to look for it," the girl said, and with an expert twist, pulled free.

Her voice carried far, and there was thin stock for gossip in that village; so her words were still remembered three years later when Aithan came traveling there.

Tawny-haired and amber-eyed, he was not a bad-looking man—though less comely than the one who'd been rebuffed so neatly at the well. He came driving an ancient-looking horse and a wagon full of odd tools and bundles.

"Any work for a tinker in these parts? Or a farrier, perhaps?" he asked the men in the market square.

One man shrugged. "Set up shop and find out," another said.

"I'll buy your wagon," one tradesman called over to the traveler.

"Sorry, I can't—it's been my house these many days. But hey, goodman, don't despair of the one you have. I can fix that wheel and axle." And so in a matter of moments he was kneeling by the tradesman's cart, beginning to earn his keep.

He had their good will then, plus the offer of a place to stay and work as a handy-man. He was striding off at good speed to drink to that offer, when he collided with the sinewy body of a maid, knocking down the basket she held at one hip, sending onions and radishes careening through the air.

"Blood and gall!" she cried, scrambling to fetch her basket, breathing out a steady stream of curses as she picked up vegetables from the roadside dust.

"Your pardon, lady, I—let me help." Aithan inched toward her to return an onion or two to the basket and place a hand on her shoulder. She stopped cursing and looked up at him, her dark eyes intense like a madwoman's. *Two hot coals in a fire,* he thought, watching the wild red curls dance about her shoulders; and he was visited by inspiration. "You must forgive me—I was blinded by your radiance."

"In that case, good sir," she said gravely, "I owe you an eyeshade." So saying, she took the basket and, as gently as possible, up-ended it on his head.

Aithan grinned from under the basket as she walked away. "Beautiful!"

"Watch out," laughed the tradesman, shaking his head. "That's the girl whose heart is down the well."

Only a week had passed in his new situation when Aithan happened to walk home late from an errand in the town. It was utter night, but the moon shone full and clear, so he could see a good way ahead of him. Winding around to the village square, he noticed a humanlike figure sitting where no living folk should be at midnight. He thought it must be an imp or a fairy out for the full moon. A wise man would turn away, but he'd never seen the Good People before and had a mind to try. So the tinker walked more softly, but no less surely forward.

He was not disappointed. On the lip of the well sat the red-haired woman—fishing. She had a weighted net which she let down on a huge rope, peering anxiously after it, only to haul it up empty and try again. Her soft sighs and curses rang unwontedly loud in the empty square.

A few soft steps, and he was within a polite distance of her. "Then it's true what you told that old suitor of yours?"

"Yes." She looked up at him, startled. "You are the first to know."

"Do you always come here?"

"Only on clear nights. That's when I can see something struggling in the depths."

He peered over the edge, but did not see. "Do you want me to go down and look for it?"

"You—you don't even know me!" she cried.

"Well, *pardon* my presumption —"

"Oh, I didn't mean it like that. I was just startled," she said hurriedly, seeing his stung look. "But it is *my* heart, you

Artwork by Michael Kucharski

see, and only I can find it." She hauled up the net as she spoke. "If anyone can."

In silence he watched her cast it back before he dared break the stillness again. "My name's Aithan," he said.

"Mine is Ardirá."

"I still have your basket. The vegetables went bad, I'm afraid."

She began to laugh, then, at last. "Sometimes, you know, I can't help myself. You must forgive me; I was dazzled by the brilliance of your wit."

"Now that's flattery I can't resist—even if you didn't mean it."

"Imitation *is* a form of flattery, I suppose."

"So it is, and I'll take what I can get. I know you won't do it often; you're far too original." He nodded toward the well. "Are you sure it's down there?"

"You saw nothing, then? Do you think I'm mad? It's only by moonlight that I see it, blood-red, alive. Sometimes I wonder why it hasn't died."

"How long has it been there?"

"Years and years. I was little more than a child."

"How did you lose it?"

She lifted and lowered the net once again, and for a while he thought he'd have no answer. But at length she spoke: "Things happen, even in a peaceful backwater like this, that can drive a person's heart out of her body. I wanted to send it any place far enough to be safe."

"You willed it down there?"

"The well wasn't what I had in mind. I wanted a nice safe cave that I could visit now and then. But all I asked for in the charm was somewhere deeply hidden, dark to prying eyes. I never guessed it would be someplace so cold." She drew the net up again, scarcely even looking down to be sure it was empty. "At first I didn't bother to fish for it—it might just as well drown as starve. But it calls to me; and I'd rather pull it up than throw myself down." She leaned over the edge, thoughtful. "I think now I *should* go down."

"Holy saints!" He seized her arm to pull her back from the brink. *Mad as the first of May,* he thought.

She broke from him without trouble. "Hear me out!"

He almost called the alarm then—but did he glimpse something stirring in the well below them?

"Listen," she said, "I'm not going to jump. I meant that now there are two of us, you could lower me down on the rope. If you'd be so kind," she added perfunctorily.

"Blood of the earth's black heart! What makes you think I'll agree to a plan like that?"

"Because if you don't, I'll jump in anyway. Better that than more fishing and waiting. Come now, you believe me. You don't think I'm mad—or why would you stand so long talking to me?"

"Maybe in hope of restraining you," he said. But Ardirá, undaunted, was already making a harness of the rope.

"You *are* mad, and I'm a fool," said Aithan, grabbing the rope from her hands. "Not like that. It would strangle you, and your neighbors would hang me for murder. Make a solid knot—there."

So a little later he was holding the rope taut as she felt for footholds inside the well. "Tug the rope when you want to come up," he reminded her again before she disappeared into the shadows.

He listened, breathless, to the soft water-sounds below, ready to hoist up if ever they stopped. Instead a new sound intruded: a sudden commotion of wind or wings. He began hauling even before she had time to tug the rope. As he labored, something like a large red bird shot past him, out of the well and away into darkness.

Ardirá came moments later, scrambling with all her strength. "Mother of mercies!" she sputtered, coughing up water. "It's gone."

"That was it? Your heart?"

She nodded. "Once it got loose, I couldn't hold on to it. Did you see which way it went?"

"West, maybe. But mostly up, and far out of sight. I'm sorry."

"Gone!" She tipped back her head to scowl at the night sky. "I'm leaving this place."

"Where will you go?"

"West, maybe. Anywhere. I can't stay here."

"I have a horse and gear. My wagon's still half-packed," said Aithan.

She turned toward him then with an appraising eye. "You just got here."

"You'll be glad to have me on the road,"

he continued. "I am that famous fellow, Jack of all trades: I'll never lack work in the towns. In the wilds, I can hunt. I know the roads from here to Carmaghen like the veins in my arm. What about you—what can you do?"

"Tend cows and pigs, mostly. Grow vegetables. Misspeak charms," she grimaced.

"Much good that'll be on the road."

"Why should you care? You don't have to come with me. It's *my* heart."

"Never mind me. Ardirá!" He reached for her shoulder when she would have turned away. "Never mind what I say. I'll come if you'll have me. This sort of adventure doesn't offer itself twice."

Ardirá stood awhile, dark to the moonlight, staring serious-eyed at the traveler's face. At last she spoke. "I might never repay you—even with love."

"Only misers measure their lives in debts and payments. What I do, I'll do freely; and you as well are free." He released his light hold on her shoulder and folded his arms, watching her. His eyes in the moonlight were bright as dew. "Now answer: can you bear my company?"

"Easily." She shrugged off the dripping ropes still wound about her. "I could gather my things and be quit of this place in an hour. You?"

"I don't mind traveling by night, if you don't," said Aithan.

"Good," said Ardirá, "Better than I hoped. Why shouldn't I rejoice? I've got my heart up out of the well. I've got someone to travel with. Why shouldn't I be singing?"

"Because you'd wake the countryside," Aithan said. "Let's go."

Artwork by Michael Kucharski

And so, like nightbirds, they disappeared into the darkness.

❀

Pauline J. Alama teaches "Writing & Thinking" at the University of Rochester while pursuing (often madly) a Ph.D. in medieval literature, pondering 900-year-old riddles, and finding Klingon influences in Beowulf. "Heartless", her first professionally published story, is dedicated to Paul Cunneen.

Michael Kucharski has worked as a professional illustrator and graphic artist in the advertising and journalism fields for nearly two decades. He lives in Michigan.

The Results of the Cauldron

Stories:

- 1st Place: **"Hand to Hand" by Nathan Long**
- 2nd Place: **"Dream Catcher" by Laura J. Underwood**
- 3rd Place: **"Wings" by Barbara Rosen**

Artwork:

- 1st Place: **Ray Williams for "Dream Catcher"**
- 2nd Place: **Alan Gutierrez for "Javanna's Thread"**
- 3rd Place: **Barb Armata for "Blossoms in the Night"**

Congratulations to all the winners! To vote for your favorites in *this* issue, use the ballot on page 64. Your interest and enthusiasm mean a lot to us at ***FANTASY* Magazine.**

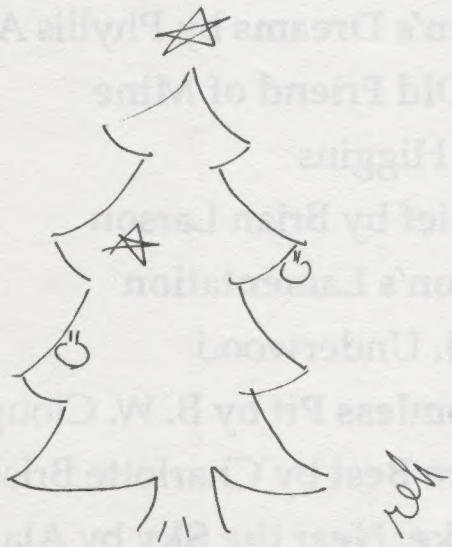
The Last Word

Well, this one's going to the printer just under the wire; he's closing down Dec. 23, and it's 3 pm on the 22nd as I write this. We've got some terrific artwork here; I think George Barr, Vincent Di Fate, and Barb Armata have outdone themselves. Dameon Willich deserves a special medal (and already has a special place in our cold editorial heart) for doing his artwork TWICE since somehow the first set he sent to us disappeared without a trace. [Editorial hearts are always cold. Just ask anyone who's ever gotten a rejection letter for the deathless prose or artwork over which they labored and which we failed to appreciate!]

We also have a story here with the best single opening line I've seen in ages: "It all began when I forgot to turn off the moon." (See Paul Carter's SONG FOR HERRMANN to find out more.)

We have the next several cover stories mapped out: Mercedes Lackey's Diana Tregarde will tell us "How I Got My Agent" with a cover by Vincent Di Fate, then Jo Clayton will entertain us with "Dinner Music", another story from the same universe as "Arakney's Web" in issue #18 (and Nick Jainschigg will do the cover for it as he did that one). And we have another Tanya Huff story lined up, probably as a cover story.

We're excited about two books that will be coming out in April: Marion's prequel to **MISTS OF AVALON**, called **THE FOREST HOUSE** (Viking), and Elisabeth Waters' **CHANGING FATE** (DAW). AND there will be a new Darkover anthology, **SNOWS OF DARKOVER**, also out that month from DAW. Marion and I will both attend NorWesCon; maybe her book will be out then and you'll be able to have her sign it. (Lisa will be on a well-deserved vacation by then.)



I'm out of time, so I'm just going to close with — **HAPPY HOLIDAYS and BEST WISHES FOR 1994** to all our readers.

— Rachel E. Holmen

Is Adult Fantasy Just Plain Silly?

One of our biggest problems is persuading people that Marion Zimmer Bradley's *FANTASY Magazine* is for adults and yet is nothing to be ashamed of. Somehow the term "adult fantasy" has acquired a bad reputation. But we're not for children, particularly, though we do prefer to avoid strong language. And if we say our stories are about elves, dragons, and fairy princesses, people think we're silly.

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The Cauldron — Issue #22

Story	Artist
❑ **Mad Evren's Dreams** by Phyllis Ann Karr	❑ Alicia Austin
❑ **He's An Old Friend of Mine** by Laura Higgins	❑ Margaret Organ-Kean
❑ **Magic Thief** by Brian Larson	❑ Gail Butler
❑ **The Demon's Lamentation** by Laura J. Underwood	❑ James Balkovek
❑ **The Bottomless Pit** by B. W. Clough	❑ Shirley Jowise
❑ **Virgins are Best** by Charlotte Brisbon	
❑ **By the Lake, Near the Sky** by Alan P. Smale	
❑ **Going There** by Gloria Wall	❑ Ray Williams
❑ **Many Dreams** by Javonna L. Anderson	❑ Dameon Willich
❑ **Ladyslipper** by Lawrence Schimel	❑ Barb Armata
❑ **The Hammock** by Candy Taylor Tutt	❑ Lynne Taylor Fahnestalk
❑ **The Gift** by Marilyn Brahen	❑ Vincent Di Fate
❑ **A Song for Herrmann** by Paul A. Carter	❑ George Barr
❑ **Bottled Rain** by L. S. Silverthorne	
❑ **The Last Dragon** by George Gemanis	
❑ **Heartless** by Pauline J. Alama	❑ Michael Kucharski

Vote for your favorite stories and artists, then send the ballot to:

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Want a subscription? An order blank is on page 63. A back issue order form is on page 25.

New from DAW Books!

FOREIGNER by C. J. Cherryh

Their ship came out of hyperdrive into an area of space with no recognizable reference coordinates, and no way back home. There they found the world of the atevi where law was kept by the use of registered assassination, where alliances were not defined by geographical borders, and where war became inevitable once humans established a working relationship with one faction of the atevi--a war that humans had no chance of winning on this planet so many light-years from home.

0-88677-590-6 SF/Original Hardcover $20.00 ($24.99 in Canada) February 1994

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From a regal Persian able to hear as much with his mind as with his ears... to a shipwrecked cat who just might rewrite the future of Tahiti...to a musician who undergoes a magical transformation...to a wizard-snared feline who finds an ally from beyond the mortal realm...here are twenty original stories to capture the heart and imagination of anyone who has ever been owned by a cat.

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EARTHSONG: Native Tongue III by Suzette Haden Elgin

On a future Earth, economic survival depends on communication and trade with alien species. But when the aliens suddenly abandon Earth, taking their technology with them and plunging the Earth into economic disaster, can the women of the Linguist Lines, who have long planned for the liberation of their sex, seize the power to save their world?

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THE BLOODY SUN by Marion Zimmer Bradley

Jeff Kerwin had both the red hair of a Comyn Lord and the bastard strains of Terrani in his blood, and though he carried a powerful matrix jewel, he had no memory of how he had acquired it. Only the Keepers could unlock the secret of his heritage--but would they?

0-88677-603-1 Science Fiction $4.99 ($5.99 in Canada) February 1994

SKYBOWL (Dragon Star #3) by Melanie Rawn

This is the first paperback edition of the dramatic conclusion to the *Dragon Star* trilogy. High Prince Pol's only hope for victory against the invaders lies in calling a private truce with the Sunrunner Lord and uniting Sunrunners and sorcerers against the enemy horde.

0-88677-595-7 Fantasy/Original $5.99 ($6.99 in Canada) March 1994

OUTWORLD CATS by Jack Lovejoy

When agents of industrial mogul Benton Ingles seize a government space station, the two cats aboard are captured and brought to Earth. But these are not Earth cats--they are fully sentient telepaths from another planet. And these cats might just prove to be the only hope for saving Earth from enslavement to one man's greed.

0-88677-596-5 SF/Original $4.99 ($5.99 in Canada) March 1994

SERPENT WALTZ (The Dancer Trilogy #2) by Jo Clayton

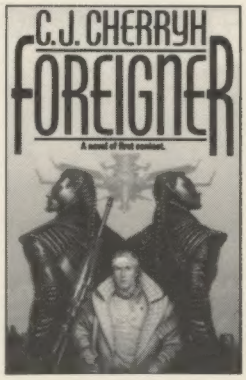
War, fueled by a mysterious evil force, is sweeping swiftly across realm after realm. And as this dark force, which has the power to alter the very laws of life and death, steals the souls of powerful leaders and raises up armies of dead warriors, Serroi and her companions are forced ever deeper into a struggle against this horror she barely understands and fears she cannot overcome....

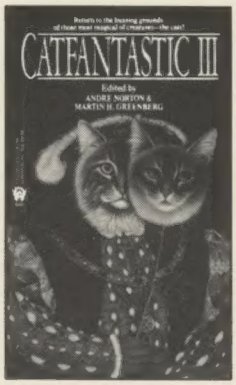
0-88677-597-3 Fantasy/Original $4.99 ($5.99 in Canada) March 1994

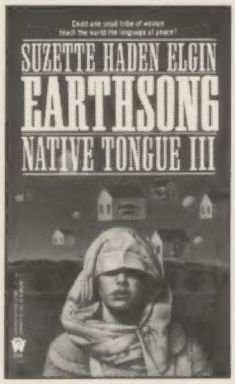
TO GREEN ANGEL TOWER, Part I (Book 3 of Memory, Sorrow and Thorn) by Tad Williams

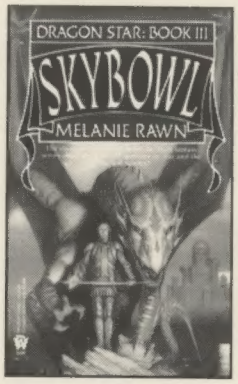
As the Storm King's power grows and the boundaries of time begin to blur, the loyal allies of Prince Josua struggle to rally their forces at the Stone of Farewell. There, too, Simon and the surviving members of the League of the Scroll have gathered for a desperate attempt to unravel mysteries from the forgotten past. For if the League can reclaim these age-old secrets of magic long-buried beneath the dusts of time, they may be able to reveal to Josua and his army the only means of striking down the unslayable foe....First paper edition of this New York Times best-seller.

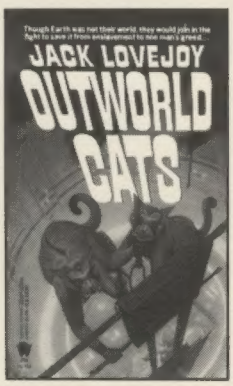
0-88677-598-1 Fantasy/Original $5.99 ($6.99 in Canada) April 1994

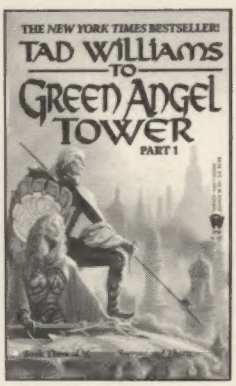












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